Soviet Airborne Forces 1930–91

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 4

CHRONOLOGY 5

EARLY YEARS OF THE VDV 6
Origins

Building an airborne force

THE VDV GOES TO WAR 15
Operations before June 1941

The Great Patriotic War begins

Stumbling in the snow at Rzhev–Vyazma

Dropping on the Dnepr

THE VDV IN THE COLD WAR 31
Hungary 1956

Operating in a nuclear world

Czechoslovakia 1968

Rotors, not silk

THE VDV IN AFGHANISTAN 50

CONCLUSION 62

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY 63

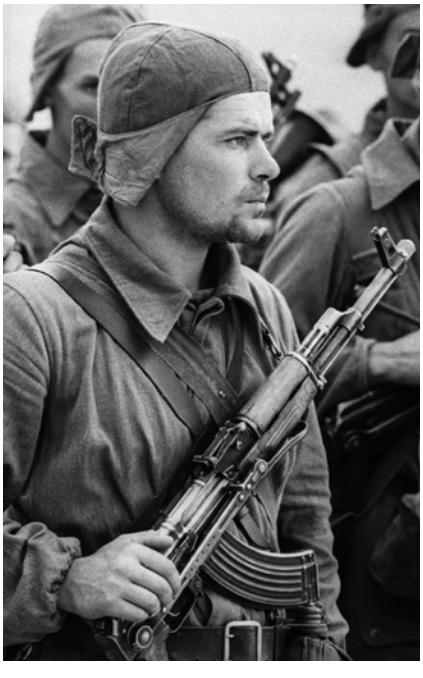
INDEX 64

SOVIET AIRBORNE FORCES 1930–91

INTRODUCTION

During the 1930s the Soviet Union was the unquestioned world leader in the development of airborne forces and doctrine. With its first tactical parachute jump on 2 August 1930, the RKKA (*Raboche-krestyanskaya Krasnaya armiya*, 'Workers' and Peasants' Red Army') opened a new chapter in warfare that would have far-reaching consequences in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–45 – though not, ironically, for the Soviet Union.

The airborne forces of the Soviet Union were known as the VDV or *Vozdushno-desantnye voyska*, literally 'air-landing forces'; 'air-landing' (hereafter translated as 'airborne') was a term that referred to parachute units, specifically air-landed units, and the type of operations that employed them both. Innovative and forward-thinking, the VDV strove to explore the possibilities inherent in the delivery of large numbers of highly trained troops well behind the enemy's lines. However, the Great Purge of 1937–38 (and its grim echoes down to 1941) ensured that such ambitions were smothered. That damage to strategic leadership combined with chronic shortages of transport aircraft to ensure that the VDV's performance in the Great Patriotic War was overshadowed by the ground forces of the Red Army (*Krasnaya Armiya*). Despite a number of small-scale successes, there were only two major operational uses of Soviet airborne troops in their designated role, at Vyazma in January–February 1942 and the Dnepr River in September 1943, both operations ending in failure.



A paratrooper, wearing jump overalls, a cloth jump helmet and armed with what appears to be a well-worn AKS-47 assault rifle, stands in line after a route march, 1971. By this time the men of the VDV were a recognized elite; General-polkovnik Vasily F. Margelov had been relentless in his drive to turn the VDV into a strategic asset, and had used the invasion of Czechoslovakia as a demonstration of their capabilities and élan. (Sputnik/TopFoto)

In 1946, control of the VDV passed from the VVS (*Voyenno-Vozdushnyye Sily*, 'Military Air Forces') to the direct control of the *Ministr Vooruzhonnykh Sil SSSR* ('Minister of the Armed Forces of the USSR'), where it became a strategic asset. Under the leadership of General-polkovnik Vasily F. Margelov from 1954, the VDV was organized and trained to conduct large-scale deep insertions behind enemy lines, attacking command-and-control facilities, lines of communication and key infrastructure targets such as nuclear power plants. To overcome the traditional weaknesses of airborne forces – a lack of mobility and low firepower – the VDV rebuilt itself into a highly flexible striking force, well-equipped with integral air assets as well as large numbers of air-delivered armoured vehicles and self-propelled guns.

The VDV played a major role during the Hungarian Uprising of June–November 1956, and in Czechoslovakia during the 'Prague Spring' protests of January–August 1968. During the Soviet–Afghan War (December 1979–February 1989), the VDV became the key assault force of the Soviet Army (*Sovetskaya Armiya*), proving to be among the most formidable of the Mujahideen's opponents. During the conflict the VDV implemented organizational evolutions and tactics that had started in the 1960s with the development of the air-assault concept – the transport, insertion and support of air-landed troops by helicopter rather than parachute.

Throughout its existence the VDV would reflect key aspects of the Soviet Union's broader history: its intellectually ambitious beginnings thwarted by self-sabotage; the bloody exigencies demanded of it by war; its adaptation to the realities of a nuclear 'stalemate'; and its inability to solve what appeared to be a simple problem in a client state on its southern border.

Airborne troops in training in the Sverdlovsk region, 1975. The overalls they wear are more or less unchanged from those issued to their forebears in the 1930s, and would continue to serve the VDV right through the war in Afghanistan and beyond. (TASS via Getty Images)

CHRONOLOGY

2 August 1930	Kombrig Leonid G. Minov leads a practice air assault that informs the establishment of the VDV.
11 December 1932	The first special-purpose airborne brigade is formed in the Leningrad Military District. By 1936 the force expands to three brigades and three regiments.
December 1938	By this time six airborne brigades have been formed, plus three airborne regiments.
22 June 1941	Operation *Barbarossa*, Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union.
July–December 1941	The six airborne brigades are expanded into ten airborne corps, later converted into rifle divisions.
18 January 1942	The Vyazma airborne operation commences. It is a failure, concluding on 28 February 1942.
April–June 1943	Twenty new Guards airborne brigades are raised.
24 September 1943	The Dnepr airborne operation is launched.
3 June 1946	Control of the VDV passes to the Ministry of Defence.
May 1954	General-polkovnik Vasily F. Margelov takes command of the VDV, continuing in that role (with a hiatus in 1959–61) until 1979.
3 November 1956	Operation *Vikhr'* ('Whirlwind'), the Soviet invasion of Hungary.
20–21 August 1968	Operation *Dunay* ('Danube'), the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia.
24 December 1979	Soviet paratroopers and special forces overthrow the Afghan government.
29 February 1980	The Kunar Valley operation.
April 1980–June 1985	Operations *Panjshir I–Panjshir IX*.
19 November 1987	Operation *Magistral* ('Highway') begins, concluding on 10 January 1988.
15 February 1989	The last Soviet troops leave Afghanistan.
9 November 1989	The Berlin Wall falls.
26 December 1991	Dissolution of the Soviet Union.

EARLY YEARS OF THE VDV

ORIGINS

In the 1920s and 1930s the Soviet Union was not the only country interested in the concept of landing troops by air, but none of its contemporaries had the initial vision or the scope of ambition that animated the RKKA's military theorists. At the beginning of 1930 there were no parachute factories in the Soviet Union, no dedicated transport aircraft and no airborne forces, but there were ideas about the sort of war the RKKA wanted to wage. Before the year was out, a number of air-landing and parachute-landing exercises had been conducted, and the first homegrown parachute factory had been established; from 1931, airborne operations became a standard element of military exercises; by the end of 1932, the first special-purpose air-assault brigade was established; by 1936, airborne doctrine was a major element in the RKKA's field regulations; and by 1939, the VDV had expanded to six 3,000-man brigades and three separate regiments, the most substantial airborne force in the world.

The driving ambition of the Soviet State to modernize, industrialize and spread its creed beyond its borders informed the conduct of the RKKA, and by 1929, this led to the concept of *Glubokyi boi* or 'deep battle' – in essence an operational-level attack upon the entire depth of an enemy's defensive line by a combined-arms force of armour, infantry, artillery and air power all acting in concert and with a clear objective. While the tank would break the positional stalemate of the previous war, the aeroplane would strike far beyond the range of artillery, but it also offered the prospect of vertical envelopments, an entirely new way to destabilize an enemy's rear area. Though such ideas were more theory than practice, they drove technological development and encouraged experimentation (Glantz 1984: 3–4).

As early as 1928, the distinguished military thinker General-mayor Mikhail N. Tukhachevsky was calling for the RKKA to develop the capability of delivering troops by air. Though Tukhachevsky's exact level of involvement in developing the concept of deep operations remains unclear, it is still one of the ideas with which he is most closely associated. A key aspect of this approach involved the development of air power, not just in the projection of force, but also in the areas of transport and supply. From there it was not a great leap to see the possibilities inherent in the air-delivery of infantry or special sabotage units.

A report from the RKKA's Revolutionary Military Council, summing up the results of the military and political preparation for the 1929–30 academic year, commented that airborne operations should be thoroughly studied from both the technical and tactical sides by the headquarters of the Red Army, with the aim of developing and then sending out appropriate instructions to the field units (Shaykin 2013: 77–78). Tukhachevsky, in his role as commander of the Leningrad Military District, conducted a number of exercises in 1929 and 1930, including one such experiment on 13 March 1930: six Tupolev TB-1 heavy bombers from the 55th and 57th squadrons of the 3rd Aviation Brigade were to ferry a 70-man force on a practice mission, inserting them near Novgorod and enabling them to 'blow up' a bridge. In the event, bad weather meant that only four of the aircraft found the landing site and had to come in one after another, eventually getting 45 men, four

machine guns and 600kg of supplies offloaded, but the overall mission was deemed a success. Tukhachevsky wrote up his findings of that and other exercises in the study 'Actions of Airborne Units in Offensive Operations', in which he called for the establishment of a table of organization and equipment (TOE) for an aviation motorized division.

Initially, there was no thought of delivering troops by parachute; rather, the expectation was for aircraft to land on designated patches of ground or airfields, allowing troops to alight with their weapons and equipment. This was in part due to the non-existent nature of the Soviet parachute industry, but contacts in the late 1920s with the Irving Air Chute Company of Buffalo, New York had led to the purchase of a number of parachutes to equip test pilots, as well as for general training purposes. Soon afterwards, a licence was negotiated that allowed the establishment of a domestic Soviet parachute factory in April 1930, making Irving-pattern parachutes for pilots (PL-1), pilot-observers (PN-1) and for training (PT-1), with production expected to reach 2,000 a month by the end of 1932, and doubling the following year. Parachutes for the airborne infantry were developed separately, as they were required to be more robust and bear greater weight than those used by aircrew baling out of a stricken aircraft; by 1931 the PD-1 (a development of the Irving design, but worn on the back instead of the chest) was in production, replaced in by 1933 the PD-2, with the PD-6 entering service in 1936. The PD-10 (designed to handle heavier loads) came out in 1940, with the square-canopied PD-41 arriving the following year.

At the same time, the VVS chief-of-staff, Polkovnik Aleksandr N. Lapchinsky, was writing a paper with Polkovnik N.P. Ivanov that examined the logistics and practical issues that would need to be understood to allow for the successful insertion of battalion- or regiment-sized units (Glantz 1984: 4). Kombrig Leonid G. Minov, a VVS officer, was tasked with developing a test unit of parachutists from the men of the 11th Air Brigade. Minov had been the officer despatched to purchase parachutes for the VVS from the Irving Air Chute Company; his current role was parachute-training instructor for the VVS, in which capacity he was instructing members of the

ABOVE LEFT
A group of paratroopers undergo a military inspection prior to take-off, *c.*1930–34. The overalls appear to be dark-blue VVS issue (worn before the issue of khaki versions became more common after 1935); the jump helmets are leather, but would be replaced with a simpler cotton model for summer activities. Leather jump helmets (usually lined with wool) were retained for cold-weather operations, though in the Great Patriotic War it seems to have been commonplace for paratroopers to wear the *ushanka* fur hat when jumping in winter conditions. (Scheufler Collection/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images)

ABOVE RIGHT
A Soviet paratrooper leaps from an aircraft during a training exercise, *c.*1934. Despite widespread interest in the possibilities of parachute-landed infantry, no other nation was conducting operations on anything like this scale at this time, though that would gradually change. (KEYSTONE-FRANCE/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

OPPOSITE
Paratroopers landing during a mass exercise conducted near Kiev, 1935. Prompted by shortages of suitable aircraft, the VDV pursued a variety of innovative methods of delivering troops by air. Reconnaissance aircraft and early bombers could only take a few troops internally, but in 1931 the Soviet parachute pioneer Pavel I. Grokhovskiy developed a form of cradle called the 'Automatic Red Army Soldier Deployment Device' (Kotelnikov 2019: 64) that would be slung under an aircraft's fuselage or wing, and in which a paratrooper would lie cocooned. As the drop zone approached, an observer inside the aircraft would pull a lever that flipped the cradle over, dropping the paratrooper and automatically pulling his ripcord; up to 12 such cradles could be fitted under the wings of each TB-1 heavy bomber, with another four possible cradles positioned along the ventral plane of the fuselage. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this concept never progressed beyond the experimental stage. Other ideas included pods that could accommodate ten paratroopers attached to an aircraft's ventral plane and a 14-man 'personnel cage' that would drop as a single unit with the paratroopers inside. Another of Grokhovskiy's creations, the 'aviabus', was a bomber-borne detachable pod that could contain men or *matériel*, and could be dropped at a low altitude over the landing zone; a basic aerodynamic design coupled with wheels (or skis in winter) would enable the aviabus to land and come to a safe stop through friction, after which the occupants could exit and begin their attack. Unfortunately, tests did not go well, and the idea gradually fell out of favour. (Sputnik/TopFoto)

11th Air Brigade at Voronezh. During 26–29 July 1930, Minov led a team of 30 hand-picked men in 59 practice jumps, and when his commanding officer was informed of the success Minov had enjoyed, he asked him to prepare a demonstration of an airborne assault by parachute, to take place on 2 August.

On the day of the demonstration, Minov led a small team that he had chosen from the 11th Air Brigade (the assault force being made up from the parachutists who had proved most capable in the July exercises) towards a Farman F.62 Goliath from the 59th Squadron. The small number of parachutists – a dozen men including Minov – was dictated by the fact that they only had 12 imported Irving parachutes. All their weapons and ammunition would be dropped separately by three supporting Polikarpov R-1 biplanes following on from the Goliath transport. As there was only one Goliath and it could only carry a maximum of six passengers at a time, it was necessary to break the jump into two groups; the first, led by Minov, would jump from 500m, and the second (some 25 minutes later), led by Polkovnik Yakov D. Moshkovsky, would jump from 300m, both groups landing near to the small farmstead of Klochkovo outside Voronezh. The action proved a success and revealed some of the issues around dispersal, visibility and the time it would take for a body of parachutists to assemble and ready themselves to fight once on the ground. More importantly, it demonstrated that a landing behind enemy lines conducted by parachute was eminently feasible. Although the parachutists were actually all pilots rather than paratroopers (a role which did not yet exist), over the succeeding years Minov's practice air assault of 2 August 1930 has come to be seen as the founding moment of the VDV.

BUILDING AN AIRBORNE FORCE

This proved to be a time of considerable innovation, with many ideas as to how men and *matériel* might be more effectively delivered by air assets to the modern battlefield. While some of the stranger ideas proved to be blind alleys, experiments with how to deliver cargo, including artillery and vehicles ranging from bicycles up to small tankettes, did bear fruit. Investigation into the idea of air-delivered equipment had begun towards the end of 1928. The equipment to be dropped would usually be packed in a cylindrical bag that would be slung from the bomb racks under an aircraft's wings or fuselage, and would be released in the same way as ordnance. For bulkier items, specialized 'cargo bridges' were manufactured that could be fitted to an aircraft's fuselage between the undercarriage (usually of TB-1 or TB-3 heavy bombers), allowing items to be landed (the PG-12) or air-dropped by parachute (the PG-12P). The PG-12 system was introduced in 1936, and enabled the transport of cars and other vehicles weighing up to 3 tonnes, with an air-droppable capacity of 2 tonnes (Kotelnikov 2019: 155–56).

Tukhachevsky joined the General Staff in May 1931, enabling him to further the concept of 'deep battle' as well as the role that airborne forces could play in such operations. The perceived success of the airborne exercises that had been conducted to date led to the formation of an experimental aviation motorized landing detachment in the Leningrad Military District in March 1931. This force of 164 men was commanded by Polkovnik Evgeny D. Lukin and was made up of a rifle company with sapper, communications and light-vehicle platoons (GAZ-A cars, bicycles and Harley-Davidson motorcycles); they were equipped with two 76mm guns, two T-27 tankettes,

four rifle grenade launchers, two DRP recoilless rifles, four M1910 Maxim heavy machine guns, 14 DP light machine guns and a variety of light vehicles. Aviation support was provided by 300 personnel who serviced and operated 12 TB-1 heavy bombers and ten Polikarpov R-5 light aircraft (Glantz 1984: 5). The remit of Lukin's unit included: penetration of the enemy's territory to destabilize the existing political environment, to organize centres of rebellion, and to help such insurgencies spread in connection with friendly offensive operations; the destruction of enemy stores, railways and roads and the disruption of enemy communications; the capture of key locations and the destruction of enemy strongpoints ahead of the advance of friendly units; and the disruption of the enemy's efforts at mobilization.

The detachment proved its worth in a series of exercises in 1931 and 1932, though it was in practice an air-landing unit as it still lacked an effective parachute element, which hampered many of the more elaborate tests it could have undertaken. In Tukhachevsky's analysis, the air element would be fully ready for operations only once it had learned to reliably ensure the deployment of a parachute echelon, which would have to be able to capture and hold enemy airfields and landing sites, and when it became able to provide airborne operations in the depths of the enemy's operational defence (Shaykin 2013: 15).

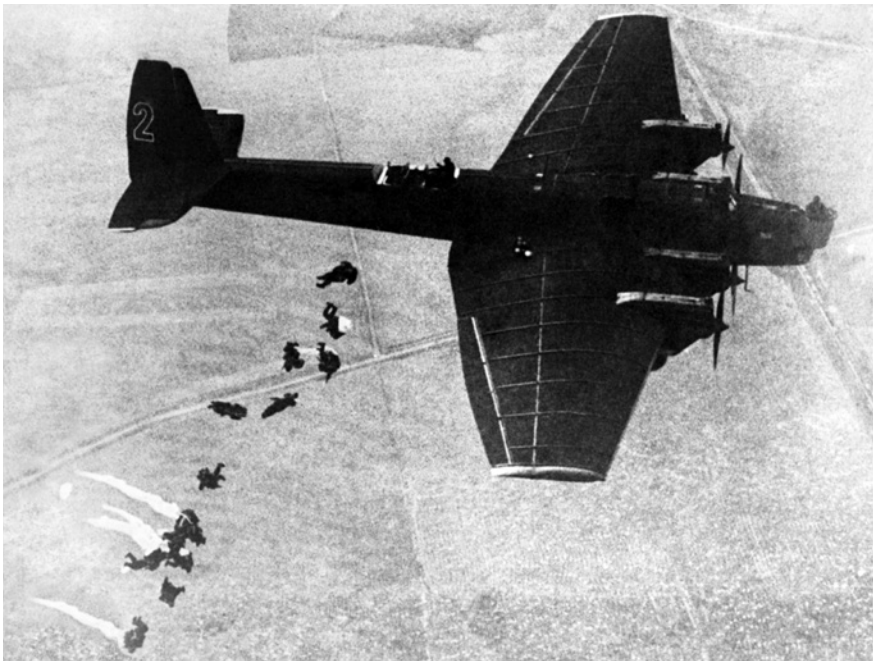
Despite these shortcomings, there was a strong sense within the RKKA that airborne forces were a valid proposition. The publication of 'Regulation on the Operational-Tactical Employment of Aviation Motorized Landing Detachments' stated that airborne assets were to be deployed at army level

A 7.62×54mmR SVT-40 semi-automatic rifle (*Samozaryadnaya Vintovka Tokareva*, 'Tokarev Self-loading Rifle'), a development of the SVT-38. The SVT-40's ten-round magazine was detachable, but the weapon could also be loaded through the breech using the same five-round stripper clips as the 7.62×54mmR M91/30 bolt-action rifle. While the very first Soviet paratroopers were armed with little more than 7.63×25mm C96 Mauser pistols or 7.62×38mmR M1895 Nagant revolvers and M1914 hand grenades, as the VDV formations grew in size the main weapon would become the M91/30 and its shorter M1907 carbine version (later the M1938 carbine), which lacked a bayonet and was 289mm shorter and 0.95kg lighter than the M91/30. Some VDV personnel were issued the rather fragile SVT-38/-40 in place of the M91/30, though the semi-automatic rifle's length (at 1,226mm, it was only 6mm shorter than the M91/30) was hardly ideal. Issue of the 7.62×25mm PPD-40 submachine gun (like the SVT-38/-40, ideally allotted to one-third of the men in a unit) was hampered by relatively low rates of production in 1939–40, meaning that its adoption by airborne units was unlikely to have been consistent or widespread, certainly before 1941. (Drake00/Wikimedia/ CC BY-SA 3.0)

in support of deep operations. The Red Army Training Directorate formalized the process of airborne education, breaking it down into four main elements: parachute, glider, air-landing and combined operations. Following that, in April 1932 the range of equipment that airborne forces were expected to require was laid out in the 'Regulations Concerning the Special Design Bureau (OKB) of the VVS, RKKA'. Underpinning these developments were refinements of doctrine, with Tukhachevsky observing in an article how 'air assault forces must operate between deployed enemy corps, army, and front reserves, arresting the action of the forces throughout the operational depth of the defense' (quoted in Glantz 1984: 8), a position that was supported and expanded upon by the chief of airborne forces of the VVS staff, Evgeny I. Tatarchenko (Glantz 1984: 7–8). All this work was occurring while repeated exercises and demonstrations were undertaken by the Leningrad Military District aviation motorized landing detachment, further cementing the impression that airborne operations could be extremely valuable to the RKKA.

On 11 December 1932, the existing aviation motorized landing detachment in the Leningrad Military District was expanded into the 3rd Special Purpose Airborne Brigade, with responsibility for the practical development of methods that would become universal throughout all airborne units. These were mandated on 1 March 1933, and were to consist of four aviation landing detachments (stationed in the Moscow, Belorussian, Ukrainian and Volga military districts), and 29 special-purpose air-landing battalions that would be embedded with rifle divisions and corps stationed throughout several other military districts. The 3rd Special Purpose Airborne Brigade consisted of a parachute rifle battalion, a battalion-sized motorized contingent and an artillery battalion; the air group consisted of two squadrons of TB-3 heavy bombers (adapted to take 32 paratroopers or 50 air-landing infantry each) and one squadron of R-5 light bomber/reconnaissance aircraft. The four aviation landing detachments each had two parachute companies and one air-landing group that consisted of one T-27 tankette company and one motorized rifle company (Sharp 1995: 2).

The airborne brigades tended to attract more capable recruits, with a higher percentage of Communist Party members and Komsomol (*Kommunisticheskii Soyuz Molodyozhi*, 'Young Communist League') graduates among their recruits than was the norm, with all commanders expected to be tried and true Communist Party men. Many of the more ambitious young people gravitated towards new state organizations such as the overtly paramilitary OSOAVIAKhIM (*Obshchestvo sodiestviia oborone I aviatsionnokhmicheskomu stroitelstvu SSSR*, 'Union of Societies of Assistance to Defence and Aviation-Chemical Construction of the USSR') and the Komsomol, a more political organization in which 'good citizenship' was instilled through ideological education. Parachuting and glider clubs proved particularly popular; the OSOAVIAKhIM began training parachutists from 1 January 1933, and by 1935 it had over 2,000 clubs and schools across the country. Such an infrastructure ensured that there were plenty of jump-



A classic image of Soviet paratroopers tumbling off the wings and fuselage of a Tupolev TB-3 during a training exercise, likely in the late 1930s. The TB-3 was a heavy bomber that was introduced in 1932 and officially retired in 1939, though the VVS's heavy wartime losses necessitated that it remained in service. Despite its designation it also served as a paratroop transport, in which role it could carry a number of men on the wings and fuselage or – in converted TB-3 models – up to 32 paratroopers internally. Though it had proved to be a useful platform in demonstrating the potential of air-delivered infantry during the 1930s, carrying paratroopers on the wings and fuselage was far from ideal; even so, the lack of enough suitable aircraft such as the Lisunov Li-2D meant that the TB-3 would be used in paratrooper training throughout the Great Patriotic War. (Sovfoto/UIG via Getty Images)

trained personnel on whom the VDV could draw, to the extent that even after the horribly damaging battles of 1941 there were still an estimated 100,000 trained parachutists available to rebuild the VDV's shattered brigades.

Parachute training was an obvious necessity, but despite the increasing popularity of sport parachuting in the civilian world there were many recruits who lacked any knowledge of the art. As a result, financial incentives were offered (25 roubles for the first jump, 50 for the fifth and 100 for the tenth, with 50 roubles for jumps at night or over water), as well as morale-boosting badges that displayed a soldier's achievements and the number of jumps he had undertaken (Kotelnikov 2019: 271). Standard military education was considerably more in-depth than that found in the rest of the RKKA; paratroopers were expected to be able to use any weapon in their inventory, to be able to perform rudimentary first aid, to ride bicycles and motorcycles and to operate tractors and even steam locomotives, as well as to know how to lay cable and use a radio set. Combat training included familiarization with enemy weapons, ambush techniques and small-unit tactics, personal camouflage, demolition, and the sabotage of railways, airfields and oil installations (Kotelnikov 2019: 273–74).

The VDV undertook a series of exercises of ever-increasing scale and complexity during 1933 and 1934, allowing it to refine training and doctrine through hard practical experience. Another large exercise, conducted during 12–17 September 1935 in the Kiev Military District, involved more than 65,000 troops, 1,000 tanks, 600 aircraft and 300 artillery pieces. The basis of the combat, a test of methods by which 'deep battle' could be conducted, required an attack on an enemy position (the 'red' force) by the 'blue' force, the latter consisting of a reinforced rifle corps which would make an initial penetration that would subsequently be exploited by a mechanized and a cavalry corps. The role of the airborne contingent was to establish a landing zone behind 'red' lines, seize crossing points over the Dnepr River, fend off any attempts by the enemy to send in reinforcements, and link up with the exploiting cavalry and mechanized corps.

A group of paratroopers stride across an airfield in anticipation of a jump, likely during the late 1930s or possibly early 1940. The old-style leather jump helmets they are wearing likely saw some service during the earlier stages of the Great Patriotic War, but the cloth version would soon become the norm, changing little in design for the next 50 years. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

The task was undertaken by a temporary airborne division made up of a separate parachute regiment from the Kiev Military District (a composite force of 1,188 men) which would conduct the drop, and a pair of rifle regiments (1,765 men) which would follow on in an air-landing role. Among the Western military attachés on hand to view the action was Major-General Archibald P. Wavell, who was impressed: 'This parachute descent, though its tactical value may be doubtful, was a most spectacular performance. We were told that there were no casualties and we certainly saw none; in fact the parachutists we saw in action after the landings were in remarkably good trim and mostly moving at the double' (quoted in Glantz 1984: 11–13). This very public success was accompanied by a further expansion of the VDV: by the end of 1936 two more airborne brigades were formed, the 13th in

A

EARLY SOVIET PARATROOPERS

(1 & 2) Paratroopers, 202nd Airborne Brigade, 1940

Throughout the 1930s, *desantniki* (airborne troops) wore the standard Red Army uniforms, including the M1935 *gymnasterka* ('tunic') and trousers with a *kombinezon* ('overalls') worn over the top during jumps or field exercises; except for being khaki in colour, they were the same as the dark-blue M1935 overalls issued to VVS enlisted men and the tankers of the armoured corps. Cloth caps with *ochki zashchitnyye* ('goggles') were also worn on jumps. He carries a PPD-40 submachine gun with a 71-round drum, the first really successful iteration of the PPD series of submachine guns, and is equipped with a PD-6 parachute. Throughout the 1930s most jumps were made from adapted platforms such as repurposed TB-3 heavy bombers; such aircraft usually lacked any facility for the employment of static lines, so paratroopers usually relied on ripcords to open their parachutes.

The PD-6 (*Parashyut Desantnyy 6*, 'Paratroop Parachute 6') entered service in 1936, replacing the earlier Soviet PT-3 and PT-4 parachutes that were derivatives of the American T1 and T2 models (made by the Irving Air Chute Company of Buffalo, New York – the 'T' stood for 'Training'). Despite continuing developments that led to the PD-7, PD-8 and PD-10 parachutes in the years before the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the PD-6 would continue in service as the main parachute of the VDV until its replacement with the simpler PD-41 for most *desantniki* in early 1942. Like its T1 and T2 predecessors, the PD-6 was designed to integrate both main and reserve parachutes in a single rig; the main canopy (made from percale, a type of finely woven cotton) was a circular dome with a diameter of 8.76m and an area of 60.3 sq m, and was opened by the user pulling the ripcord handle which was located on the left-hand side of his rig, though unacceptably high losses due to the failure of paratroopers to pull their ripcords in good time led to the adoption of a static line. Throughout the 1930s it was Soviet practice during training jumps to activate the reserve as well as the main parachute, descending under both canopies in order to reduce oscillation (Richards 2003: 6–8).

(3) *Mladshiy leytenant*, 3rd 'Voronezh' Airborne Regiment, 1941

This young junior lieutenant serves in the 3rd 'Voronezh' Airborne Regiment which (along with the 1st 'Rostov' and 2nd 'Gorokhovets') was one of three airborne regiments assigned to the Moscow Military District. He wears the standard M1935 uniform and the light-blue pre-war insignia and red enamel rank pip on his collar marking him out as a *mladshiy leytenant*. As it was under the control of the VVS, the VDV followed the parent branch in rank markings and insignia, though both officers and men wore the M1935 khaki uniforms of the Red Army rather than the blue versions of the VVS. He is armed with a seven-shot 7.62×38mmR M1895 Nagant revolver, a passable sidearm but outdated in comparison to the newer TT ('Tula-Tokarev') semi-automatic pistol that had been accepted into service in 1930.

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Paratroopers in overalls and jump helmets and armed with the 7.62×54mmR DP light machine gun (*Pulemot Degtyarova Pekhotnyy*, 'Degtyaryov's infantry machine gun'), on parade sometime in the 1930s. The DP was an obvious weapon to supply to light infantry such as the nascent VDV, who lacked the heavy weapons of a standard infantry company. Initially, weapons were air-dropped in separate bags, but it was soon evident that it would be better for the paratroopers to land with the means to fight already in their hands. It was also recognized that due to the likely dearth of heavy weapons available, paratroopers would need as much firepower as possible, so each section was allotted a DP. The main artillery piece was the 76mm M1927 regimental gun, with some use of the 76mm DRP-4 recoilless rifle as well. (Nik Cornish at www.stavka.org.uk)

the Kiev Military District and the 47th in the Byelorussian Military District. In addition, three airborne regiments (the 1st, 2nd and 5th) were raised in the Far Eastern Military District, as well as three special-purpose parachute regiments in the Moscow Military District. The 1936 Field Regulations not only set the commitment to 'deep battle' in stone, but also made explicit the role of airborne forces in such an operation: 'Parachute landing units are the effective means ... disorganizing the command and rear services structure of the enemy. In coordination with forces attacking along the front, parachute landing units can go a long way toward producing a complete rout of the enemy on a given axis' (quoted in Glantz 1984: 14). Further exercises would be conducted in 1937 that confirmed previous experiences, but while the airborne forces would continue to develop in the coming years, the intellectual framework that had nurtured them would not.

The first tremors of the Great Purge were felt in 1936, but it was over the following two years that the worst of the storm broke, with its impact continuing into 1941. Tukhachevsky would be one of the most significant victims: he was arrested on 22 May 1937, tortured into making a false confession of treason, tried on 11 June and dispatched with a bullet to the back of the head the following day. With him went nearly all the RKKA's senior officers, being replaced with men promoted out of exigency rather than ability. The purge not only killed off a generation of military leaders who were mostly battle-tested and proficient, it also wrecked the military theories they had been developing and salted the ground in which their ideas had grown. With Tukhachevsky's theories now more or less toxic, much of the impetus to refine an airborne doctrine that was part of a larger strategy was also lost.

In spite of such social and political upheaval the VDV underwent another reorganization and expansion in March 1938, forming six new airborne brigades (*vozdushno-desantnyye brigady*), the 201st, 202nd, 204th, 211th, 212th and 214th, with the Moscow Military District's three special-purpose parachute regiments being converted into separate airborne regiments in 1939. Each airborne brigade consisted of one parachute battalion, one motorized battalion and an artillery battery plus various support units for a total of 1,689 men (Shaykin 2013: 40). On 15 November 1939, the combined strength of all six airborne brigades was 9,420 men, averaging out to 1,570 men per brigade, an unusually high complement even for RKKA units on a war footing. In November 1940 the air-landing components of the brigades were removed, the theory being that the extra logistical issues with which they had to deal negatively affected the whole brigade's training and thus diluted the overall fighting power of the units; in the wake of the removal of the air-landing component the brigades were reorganized yet again, seeing their complement doubled, with infantry strength raised to four parachute battalions.

VDV AIRBORNE BRIGADES, APRIL 1939

Brigade	Location	Commander
201st	Pushkin, Leningrad Military District	I.S. Bezugliy
202nd	Khabarovsk (East Asian Front)	M.Y. Denisenko
204th	Zhitomir, Kiev Military District	I.I. Gubarevich
211th	Chernigovka (East Asian Front)	V.A. Glazunov
212th	Kuybyshev (East Asian Front)	I.I. Zatevakhin
214th	Mar'ina Gorka, Byelorussian Military District	A.F. Levashov

THE VDV GOES TO WAR

OPERATIONS BEFORE JUNE 1941

The first examples of Soviet airborne assaults long pre-dated the Great Patriotic War. Soviet expansion, with its associated cultural and economic consequences, did not go down well in the central Asian republics which saw a number of rebellions against Moscow's rule, including a group known as the Basmachi in Turkmenistan. As part of the local commander's attempts to suppress the rebels, aircraft were used to deliver handfuls of infantry, weapons and supplies in support of operations, much as the British had been doing in Mesopotamia and Palestine. Though only ever small-scale affairs, such air-landing operations by the local Soviet authorities made the most of the few aircraft they had at their disposal to overcome some of the tactical logistical problems they faced. Starting in 1927 and continuing into the early 1930s, these endeavours, usually in pursuit of evanescent groups of fast-moving fighters, were conducted over seemingly tractless wastes and hostile terrain beset with poor to non-existent infrastructure, and proved to be effective, if limited in their impact. These experiences fed into the early thinking about airborne operations, and as the strength and confidence of the VDV grew throughout the 1930s, opportunities for further operations were eagerly sought.

There had been some initial clashes involving Soviet and Japanese troops at Lake Khasan in July and August 1938, but the Soviet–Manchukuo border (in effect the Soviet–Japanese border as Manchukuo was little more than a Japanese fiefdom at this point) continued to be a source of problems. Skirmishes gave way to a more serious conflict in the region of Khalkin-Gol in May–September 1939, with the 212th Airborne Brigade deployed (a 400-strong forward detachment by air, the rest by road) in support of Komkor Georgy K. Zhukov's First Soviet Mongolian Army Group. On 20 August, the 212th Airborne Brigade, operating as infantry and working in conjunction with the 9th Motorized and Mechanized Brigade, took part in the battle of Khalkin-Gol in which the airborne troops performed admirably during their attack on Mount Fui and the Japanese right flank, winning plaudits for themselves and their commander, Polkovnik Ivan I. Zatevakhin, who was awarded the Order of the Red Banner for his efforts.

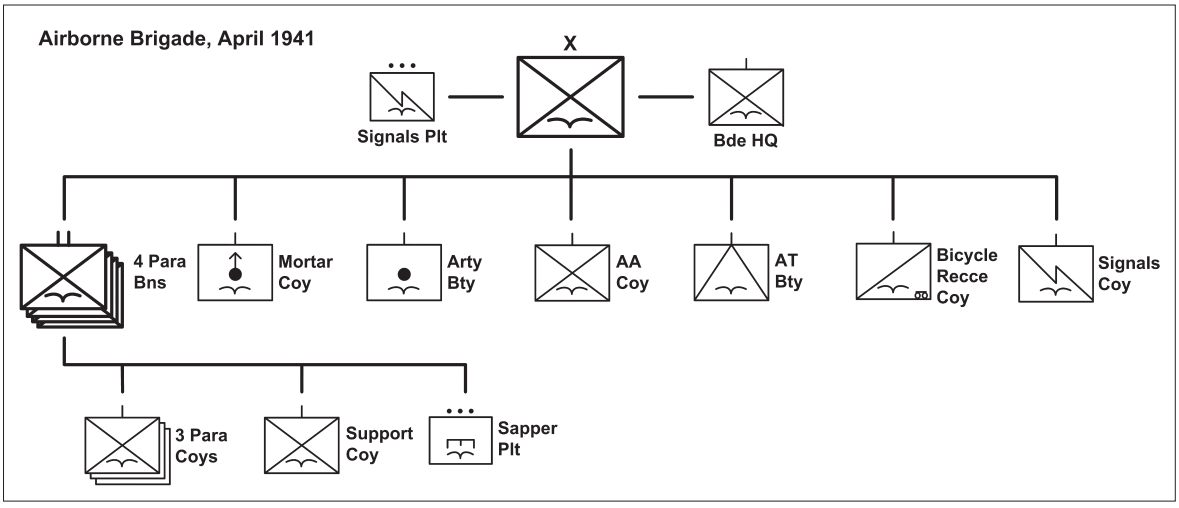
Less than two weeks later, on 1 September, war came to the West with the German invasion of Poland. That country, reeling from the strength of the Wehrmacht's attack, soon found itself fighting a war on two fronts when Soviet forces crossed over the eastern border on 17 September, Stalin intent on having a slice of the Polish cake. The 201st, 204th and 214th Airborne brigades took part in the operation, though like the 212th in the East they operated as infantry in what proved to be an easy and short campaign. In February 1940, the 201st, 204th and 214th Airborne brigades were transferred to the 15th Army, at that time deeply engaged in the Winter War against Finland (30 November 1939–13 March 1940). The first months of the conflict had proved to be a bloody debacle, but the appointment of Marshal Sovetskogo Soyuza Semyon K. Timoshenko signalled that Moscow intended to win come what may, and the subsequent Soviet operations in February and March would prove that point. The 214th Airborne Brigade remained in reserve throughout, but the 201st and 204th Airborne brigades were both committed to battle (once again as rifle infantry) and fought well, though the losses they suffered were

not insignificant. There was only one abortive attempt at a relatively small-scale airborne assault by 200 paratroopers, but even that was called off due to inclement weather. Three months later, the 214th Airborne Brigade would go on to take part in the Soviet roll-up of the Baltic states, crossing the Latvian border on the morning of 17 June in the company of the 17th Tank Brigade, reaching Riga in Latvia by midday where the paratroopers seized key parts of the capital city's infrastructure such as the port, railway station and airfield.

The first chance that the VDV had to test its operational mettle in an airborne operation would also come in June 1940, but far to the south in Bessarabia, a region that had been absorbed by Romania in the wake of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Under the threat of a full-scale invasion, the Romanian government had agreed to cede the territory to the Soviet Union on 28 June, but an assault would be conducted anyway to ensure that the retreating Romanians did not have the chance to strip the land of goods or sabotage factories and oil installations. Soviet mechanized and cavalry columns would stage rapid advances into the disputed territory, supported by three separate air assaults. On 29 June, 99 TB-3s carrying 1,436 men of the 204th Airborne Brigade flew just to the north of Bolgrad, where its personnel landed by parachute; the following day, 749 men of the 201st Airborne Brigade landed at Izmail (240 by air-landing, the remaining 509 by parachute). The 214th Airborne Brigade, which had rapidly redeployed from Riga, was also expected to make a landing, but in the end remained in reserve due to the overall speed and success of the operation (Kotelnikov 2019: 326–27). The landings encountered little to no resistance and were in effect another large-scale exercise, albeit one with the potential to turn bloody. It confirmed the capabilities of an air-landed force, but also some of the problems faced, including the virtual obsolescence of the TB-3 as a troop transport.

The initial engagements of the Soviet Union's armed forces, particularly their dismal performance in Finland during the Winter War, led to a general reappraisal of doctrine as well as of how the Red Army was organized and equipped. With the high command starting to rethink its position on 'deep battle', the role of the VDV in potential future operations was clarified and expanded, article 28 of the 1941 Field Regulations specifying that: 'Air assault forces are an instrument of higher command. They are used to decide those missions in the enemy rear area which within a specified period cannot be satisfied by other types of forces, but the decision of which can have a serious impact on the outcome of the entire operation (battle). Air assault forces must be used as a surprise for the enemy, in large masses, independent or in coordination with land, air and sea forces' (quoted in Glantz 1984: 20).

In response to this requirement (and also in part as a result of seeing the success of Germany's 7. Fliegerkorps operations during the early stages of the Battle of France in May 1940), the NKO (*Narodnyy komissariat oborony*, 'People's Commissariat of Defence') decided upon a new TOE for the airborne brigades from November 1940. This reorganization saw them expand to become 3,000-strong brigades, each with a parachute group, a glider group and an air-landed group. The parachute group consisted of two 546-strong parachute battalions, each with a signal platoon, a reconnaissance platoon, a sapper demolition platoon, a combat rations and supply platoon, a medical squad, a motorcycle-bicycle reconnaissance company, and a signal company. The glider group was organized on the same lines as the parachute group. The air-landed group was also organized on the same lines as the parachute group, but also had a mortar company (nine 82mm BM-37 mortars), an



In the April 1941 changes an airborne brigade's glider and air-landing units were removed and its four battalions were all now classified as parachute units. A parachute battalion had three companies of three platoons, each platoon having three 7.62×54mmR DP light machine guns. A battalion also had a support company with four heavy machine guns, six 50mm mortars and two 45mm anti-tank guns, as well as a sapper platoon with six flamethrowers. The brigade also had a mortar company (six 82mm mortars), an artillery battery (six 76mm howitzers), an anti-aircraft company (six 12.7×108mm DShK heavy machine guns), an anti-tank battery (four 45mm guns), as well as a signals company and bicycle-mounted reconnaissance company.

air-defence company (12 12.7mm heavy anti-aircraft machine guns), a tank company (11 T-40 or T-38 light tanks) and an artillery battalion (one battery with four 45mm pieces and a second with four 76mm pieces).

The NKO ordered another even more substantial expansion the following year, stating that from 1 April 1941 the existing airborne brigades would be increased in number to 16, most of which would be grouped into five new airborne corps (*vozdushno-desantnyy korpusa*). The current airborne brigades would supply cadres for the new formations, the aim being to establish the five airborne corps, each with 10,228 men, by 1 June 1941. An airborne corps would have three airborne brigades (consisting of 2,634 men each), a separate light-tank battalion (50 T-37 light tanks, later reduced to 32), and its own control and logistical elements. Though the airborne corps' new airborne brigades were mostly up to strength by June 1941, the bulk of the new recruits had been drawn from ordinary rifle divisions, and as a result most of the men were not conversant with airborne procedures and even fewer were fully parachute-trained; ten of the 16 new airborne brigades had not yet received any jump training or operated as a unit, and to take the 8th Airborne Brigade as an example, 65 per cent of the men had only one or two jumps to their record, while fully 25 per cent had not conducted any jumps at all (Kotelnikov 2019: 340). In addition to the problems with training, the ongoing reorganization exacerbated the already significant shortages of weaponry and equipment (particularly tanks and radios), not counting the desperate lack of lift capacity. An NKO directive of 5 June 1941 stipulated that each airborne corps was to be supported by two assault-landing aviation bomber regiments, but unsurprisingly none of them had yet formed by the time Operation *Barbarossa*, the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union, began only weeks later on 22 June.

THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR BEGINS

In the event, the Axis invasion cut short the VDV's larger plans. Despite the general state of unpreparedness, the Stavka (*Stavka Verkhovnogo Glavnokomandovaniya*, 'Supreme High Command Headquarters') immediately tried to employ VDV units in airborne assaults, a notable example being the decision on 28 June to commit the 4th Airborne Corps to an air-landing operation west of Bobruisk in support of an attack by the

20th Mechanized Corps. The 214th Airborne Brigade was the lead element, but though it arrived at its staging post there proved be insufficient aircraft to lift the brigade. After aborting that aspect of the mission, on the following day the 214th Airborne Brigade was re-tasked to attack the same area, but this time after being transported there in trucks: quickly cut off by the relentless German advance, the paratroopers made a nuisance of themselves behind the lines for several weeks, but soon enough the 214th Airborne Brigade ceased to be a coherent fighting force, with its survivors either making their way back to Soviet lines or joining up with local partisan groups. A similar debacle awaited another attempted airborne operation conducted on the southern front, proving that despite the individual mettle of such formations, they were simply not ready to conduct airborne operations, the equipment and infrastructure that such missions required either having been destroyed by the Luftwaffe or never delivered in the first place (Glantz 1998: 148). It also must be borne in mind that, even though many of the senior officers lacked the training and experience of those who had been lost to the various rounds of purges, the intensity, confusion and panic of those first few weeks of the Axis invasion revealed serious flaws in Soviet command and control more generally that would have tested the most capable of commanders.

Even if their capacity to operate as airborne infantry was severely compromised, the VDV still represented a significant force of ready manpower, and although many units lacked the particular skills and training required to execute airborne operations, they were built around a core of competent soldiers and, considering the standard of the average rifle division in June 1941, were more or less combat-ready. In short order all the newly raised airborne corps were thrown into battle along with scores of other rifle and tank divisions in the Stavka's desperate attempt to stem the advance of Operation *Barbarossa*. Going into combat as regular infantry, the paratroopers usually gave a good account of themselves in the horrendous summer battles that occurred across Byelorussia and Ukraine, suffering severe casualties as a result. Their élan and training made them more reliable troops than the rank-and-file members of the average rifle division, and thus they were heavily used in the long, rolling crisis that unfolded throughout the summer of 1941. The result was that all five airborne corps were effectively destroyed during the first three months of fighting.

The need to rebuild an effective airborne capability quickly was made manifest by Order No. 329, issued by the People's Commissar of the USSR on 29 August 1941, which established the VDV as a separate branch of service for the first time, with its own administration and a newly appointed Commander of the Airborne Forces, General-leytenant Vasily A. Glazunov. This was quickly followed by Order No. 83 on 4 September 1941, which set the full establishment of the VDV at 149,700 men. In addition to rebuilding the first five airborne corps, there were to be five additional airborne corps raised (numbered 6–10 and each 10,228 men strong), as well as five new airborne brigades (*vozdushno-desantnyye brigady*), numbered 1–5, each 3,824 men strong; ten reserve airborne regiments (*zapasnogo vozdushno-desantnogo polka*), each 3,000 men strong; a senior training academy and glider school in the city of Saratov; and the establishment of a training facility for VDV platoon commanders at the existing Infantry School in Kuibyshev (Shaykin 2013: 54).

In reality, it was difficult to raise the new airborne corps and regiments in the allotted time (they were supposed to have formed by 20 October 1941 and be ready for combat by 1 February 1942). The five existing airborne corps,

A paratrooper landing after a training jump, likely using a PD-41 parachute. The PD-41 and its derivatives proved to be a simpler system than the PD-6, and notably used a square rather than a round canopy (70 sq m), and could be operated by either manual ripcord (at a minimum of 300m above ground level) or static line (a minimum of 150m above ground level). Though the PD-41 had a reserve parachute (the PZ-41), it was not an integral part of the rig as with the PD-6, and was often omitted during combat jumps. (Sputnik/TopFoto)

all freshly rebuilt or re-formed after their battering in the initial months of the war, were understrength, some drastically so (the 1st had 3,068 men; the 2nd, 4,200; the 3rd, 3,763; the 4th, 736; the 5th, 7,600). The new airborne corps, airborne brigades and reserve airborne regiments had some difficulties raising and training troops quickly enough; despite the fact that there was a considerable pool of likely over 150,000 trained civilian parachutists available upon which to draw, the number who were eligible for military service was considerably smaller (Zaloga 1995: 28). The logistical realities of training and equipping new forces, after a summer that had seen almost the entire pre-war Red Army destroyed, the loss of thousands of aircraft of every type including many of the models that were essential for the conduct of airborne operations, as well as an autumn that promised a series of massive Axis assaults on Moscow itself, should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, elements from three airborne corps were far-enough along in their re-establishment to be able to take part in the first major airborne operation to be conducted by the Soviet Union during the Great Patriotic War.

Although most of the VDV units were committed to ground operations and German air superiority, coupled with the destruction of vast swathes of the Soviet air fleet, made ambitious airborne operations something of a pipe dream throughout much of 1941, more modest endeavours with clear objectives could deliver success. These smaller ventures had always been a part of Soviet airborne doctrine, and several such raids were launched behind German lines in Ukraine in July 1941 during which paratroopers carried out acts of sabotage as well as disrupting communications and attacking convoys. Another example of such an operation was to be found in the counter-attack launched by Soviet forces defending Odessa on the night of 21/22 September 1941. Two rifle divisions (the 157th and 421st) and the 3rd Naval Infantry Regiment were to launch concerted attacks on German positions threatening the city, aided by a detachment of 23 paratroopers who were tasked with dropping in the enemy's rear at 0130hrs, where they were to cause as much disruption and mayhem as possible. Led by *Starshina* Kuznetzov, the

small group dropped from a TB-3 right into the centre of the Romanian 15th Division's communication lines. Despite being scattered by the wind the paratroopers, often acting individually, showed great initiative and aggression, cutting telephone wires, seizing heavy weapons and turning them on their former users and assaulting one Romanian unit's headquarters with hand grenades, as well as killing and capturing a number of enemy soldiers. The well-chosen drop zone maximized the panic caused by the paratroopers' diffuse attacks, resulting in disruption out of all proportion to the small numbers of men employed. Airborne attacks such as that employed at Odessa, though limited in nature, displayed many of the hallmarks of classic paratrooper engagements, its success determined by the training and initiative of the men involved as well as the realistic nature of the objective. Larger endeavours would continue to be more problematic, however.

SOVIET AIRBORNE CORPS, 1941–44

Corps	Constituent formations	History
1st	1st, 204th and 211th Airborne brigades	First formed on 2 July 1941; destroyed in Kiev encirclement; officially disbanded on 6 August 1941. Second formation in September 1941; converted into the 37th Guards Rifle Division on 2 August 1942. Third formation in August 1942; converted into the 9th Guards Airborne Division on 9 December 1942.
2nd	2nd, 3rd and 4th Airborne brigades	First formed on 11 July 1941; destroyed in Kiev encirclement; officially disbanded on 9 September 1941. Second formation in October 1941; converted into the 32nd Guards Rifle Division on 25 May 1942.
3rd	5th, 6th and 212th Airborne brigades	First formed on 11 July 1941; converted into the 87th Rifle Division on 6 November 1941. Second formation in October 1941; converted into the 33rd Guards Rifle Division on 17 May 1942.
4th	7th, 8th and 214th Airborne brigades	First formed in April 1941; destroyed in Byelorussia; officially disbanded on 8 December 1941. Second formation in September 1941; converted into the 38th Guards Rifle Division on 6 August 1942. Third formation in October 1942; converted into the 1st Guards Airborne Division on 8 December 1942.
5th	9th, 10th and 201st Airborne brigades	First formed in March 1941; converted into the 39th Guards Rifle Division on 17 August 1942. Second formation in August 1942; converted into the 7th Guards Airborne Division on 8 December 1942.
6th	11th, 12th and 13th Airborne brigades	First formed on 29 August 1941; converted into the 40th Guards Rifle Division on 6 August 1942. Second formation in August 1942; converted into the 6th Guards Airborne Division on 8 December 1942.
7th	14th, 15th and 16th Airborne brigades	First formed on 5 December 1941; converted into the 34th Guards Rifle Division on 29 August 1942. Second formation in August 1942; converted into the 2nd Guards Airborne Division on 8 December 1942.
8th	17th, 18th and 19th Airborne brigades	First formed in September 1941; converted into the 35th Guards Rifle Division on 6 August 1942. Second formation on 23 August 1942; converted into the 3rd Guards Airborne Division on 8 December 1942.
9th	20th, 21st and 22nd Airborne brigades	First formed in September 1941; converted into the 36th Guards Rifle Division on 6 August 1942. Second formation in August 1942; converted into the 5th Guards Airborne Division on 8 December 1942.
10th	23rd, 24th and 25th Airborne brigades	First formed in October 1941; converted into the 41st Guards Rifle Division during 3–7 August 1942. Second formation on 23 August 1942; converted into the 8th Guards Airborne Division on 8 December 1942.
37th Guards	98th and 99th Guards Airborne divisions	First formed on 9 August 1944 from the 37th Guards Rifle Corps (founded 19 January 1944); converted back into the 37th Guards Rifle Corps on 18 December 1944.
38th Guards	11th, 12th and 16th Guards Airborne divisions	First formed on 9 August 1944; converted into the 38th Guards Rifle Corps on 18 December 1944.
39th Guards	HQ only	First formed on 9 August 1944; converted into the 39th Guards Rifle Corps on 18 December 1944.

STUMBLING IN THE SNOW AT RZHEV–VYAZMA

In the event, the German attempt to capture Moscow failed, but Axis forces were still gnawing at the approaches to the city. The success of the initial Soviet counter-attacks had knocked the divisions of Heeresgruppe Mitte (Army Group Centre) back on their heels, but the growing ferocity of German resistance coupled with the harshness of the weather gradually blunted the Soviet counter-offensive. As a result, a new push was needed; major attacks would be launched from the Kalinin and Western fronts with the aim of pinning down Heeresgruppe Mitte while a pair of pincers swept around its flanks in a double-envelopment to meet at Vyazma, cutting the town off completely. Set to launch on 8 January, the 'Rzhev–Vyazma offensive operation' would also make use of some of the freshly rebuilt airborne units in a series of drops behind enemy lines.

There had been some small measure of success in rebuilding the Soviet Union's shattered air fleet, in part by drafting in aircraft from East Asia, so there was a limited airlift capacity (though it would prove to be far from enough). In addition, on 14–15 December 1941 a battalion-sized special raiding detachment of 415 paratroopers built around a nucleus of men from the 214th Airborne Brigade and under the command of Kapitan Ivan G. Starchak had been dropped behind German lines near the town of Teryayeva Sloboda, and had cut something of a dash before returning safely ten days later. The availability of several mostly rebuilt airborne brigades and the apparent success of Starchak's raid encouraged the Stavka to develop an airborne component to the plan.

The first phase enjoyed a modicum of success, with tactical drops on 3 January (a battalion of the 201st Airborne Brigade from the 5th Airborne Corps) and 4 January (Starchak's battalion-sized detachment), with the airborne troops ordered to seize targeted road junctions and attack German command and logistics infrastructure in anticipation of the arrival of ground forces within four or five days. The first drop went smoothly enough, but Starchak's the following night was a rougher affair; his force was meant to secure an airfield to allow the air-landing of the 250th Rifle Regiment under Mayor Nikolai L. Soldatov, but German resistance and Soviet communications failures meant that, although Starchak's force was successful in taking the airfield, Soldatov's men never arrived. Starchak used his initiative to do what damage he could, before he and his 87 remaining men linked up with advancing Red Army troops on 20 January.

A further jump was set for 18 January, the plan being to drop the 1st and 2nd battalions of the 201st Airborne Brigade 32km behind German

Lisunov Li-2 transport aircraft in post-war Polish service. The Li-2 was more or less a direct copy (under licence) of the Douglas DC-3, and much like in the US and British air forces it would be used in a number of roles including that of cargo hauler, troop transporter, and – in the shape of the Li-2D that entered Soviet service in 1942 – an aircraft that was specifically designed for airborne operations. The Li-2D had the obvious advantage of being able to carry its load of 25 fully equipped paratroopers internally rather than on the fuselage and wings like the unconverted TB-3s. Another significant benefit was that it was possible to use static lines to open the jumpers' parachutes rather than rely on manual release; this reduced accidents and allowed paratroopers to drop from as little as 150m above ground level at speeds of up to 300km/h, a tactical advantage that reduced the time that it took the paratroopers to descend (and thus their intense vulnerability to ground fire). (Flight Collection/TopFoto)

OPPOSITE
A pair of Soviet paratroopers in snowsuits place demolition charges on a length of railway track behind the German lines, early 1942. The airborne missions in support of the Rzhev–Vyazma operations were the first large-scale use of the VDV in the Great Patriotic War, but logistical difficulties and unrealistic planning put paid to any chance of such missions being a success. Though individual units fought well, the overall result was a waste of many men and much *matériel*. (Sovfoto/UIG via Getty Images)

lines, where they would seize a nearby airfield and air-land Soldatov's 250th Rifle Regiment. There were not enough aircraft available to lift both of the 201st Airborne Brigade's battalions at once, so the drop occurred in two stages, both of which were hampered by bad weather and scattering. Soldatov landed 1,100 of his men on an improvised airstrip (the airfield, defended by 20mm anti-aircraft guns, proving too tough a nut to crack), and though he and the paratroopers enjoyed some small successes, more substantial victories eluded them, both forces linking up with friendly units by 31 January.

Thus far the Soviet airborne operations had been limited in scope and had delivered commensurately limited gains, but a much more substantial endeavour was waiting in the wings. The Soviet pincers were to strike towards the major supply roadways that supported Heeresgruppe Mitte while General-mayor Alexei F. Levashev's 4th Airborne Corps (8th, 9th and 214th Airborne brigades) was tasked with dropping to the west of Vyazma, which was the major road and rail hub between Moscow and Smolensk, and cut off the withdrawal of enemy units to the west. The paratroopers would hold out until able to link up with the 33rd Army from the north and the 1st Guards Cavalry Corps from the south, closing the net around the Germans.

The 4th Airborne Corps was a well-led force, and one that had escaped the worst of the previous summer's depredations, though the 214th Airborne Brigade had to be rebuilt after it had spent three months surrounded in Byelorussia. Despite the fact that the conscientious airborne staff responsible for planning the operation worked hard to ensure that the many moving parts of such an undertaking would work seamlessly with one another, there were several critical issues that were underestimated. First, the drop area was much more heavily defended than the haphazard intelligence reports from partisans had suggested; second, a desperate lack of airlift capacity (65 aircraft in all: 40 Lisunov PS-84 airliners – the original designation of the Li-2 – and 25 TB-3s, the whole force protected by only 19 fighters) meant that it would require a series of constant airdrops over a period of several days and nights in ideal conditions to deliver the whole airborne corps; and finally, there was a lack of understanding as to how important the coordination and link-up with other ground forces would be.

Levashev's force began departing from the air bases around Kaluga at 1430hrs on 27 January. The first waves, kilometres off target and dropped from 1,500m instead of 500m, were widely scattered, resulting in the loss of most of their equipment. The Germans, well-acquainted with the airfields the paratroopers were using, attacked them, wrecking many of the PS-84s and TB-3s, with the result that by 1 February only 2,081 men from the 8th Airborne Brigade had been dropped. Further sorties were halted, and the paratroopers were left to attempt to link up with nearby elements of the 1st Guards Cavalry Corps and hold out as best they could. A second jump with similar objectives was undertaken on 17–18 February, carried out by the 4th Airborne Corps' two remaining brigades, 7,373 paratroopers being dropped over seven nights. The force was badly scattered, however, with only about 5,000 men eventually forming up, a situation made worse by the death of Levashev (killed in a Luftwaffe fighter attack on his transport) and the loss or destruction of around 70 per cent of the supplies and light weapons. By early March, combat and attrition had halved the force to fewer than 2,500 effectives.

The paratroopers of the 4th Airborne Corps would, in concert with various other Red Army units, form a pocket and hold off German attacks throughout the following three months, their mission now to be a thorn in Heeresgruppe Mitte's side. Reinforcements from the 23rd and 211th Airborne brigades were dropped at the end of May, but the eventual collapse of the pocket became inevitable when the Germans decided to

A group of PPSh-41-armed paratroopers pose for a photograph, probably from the mid-war period. The disastrous deployments at Vyazma in January 1942 coupled with a lack of aircraft to make effective use of them led to the ten airborne corps being converted to Guards rifle divisions in 1942, with another ten new airborne corps raised to replace them. Those new corps were themselves converted into Guards rifle divisions by the end of 1942, and were in their turn replaced with new airborne brigades raised in early 1943. (Courtesy of the Central Museum of the Armed Forces, Moscow via Stavka)

Soviet parachutists drawn up in formation on parade before boarding aircraft to take part in training exercises rehearsing assault landings from the air, likely in late 1942. The paratroopers are dressed for severe winter conditions, wearing overcoats, *ushanka* fur hats and probably *valenki* felt boots, with a mix of PD-6 and PD-42M parachutes in use. As far as personal weapons were concerned, many units were largely equipped with the rather long M91/30 bolt-action rifle or the scarcely less cumbersome SVT-40 semi-automatic rifle as opposed to the handier PPD-40 submachine gun, though the PPSh-41 and later the PPS-43 submachine guns became much more common as the war progressed. (Topfoto)

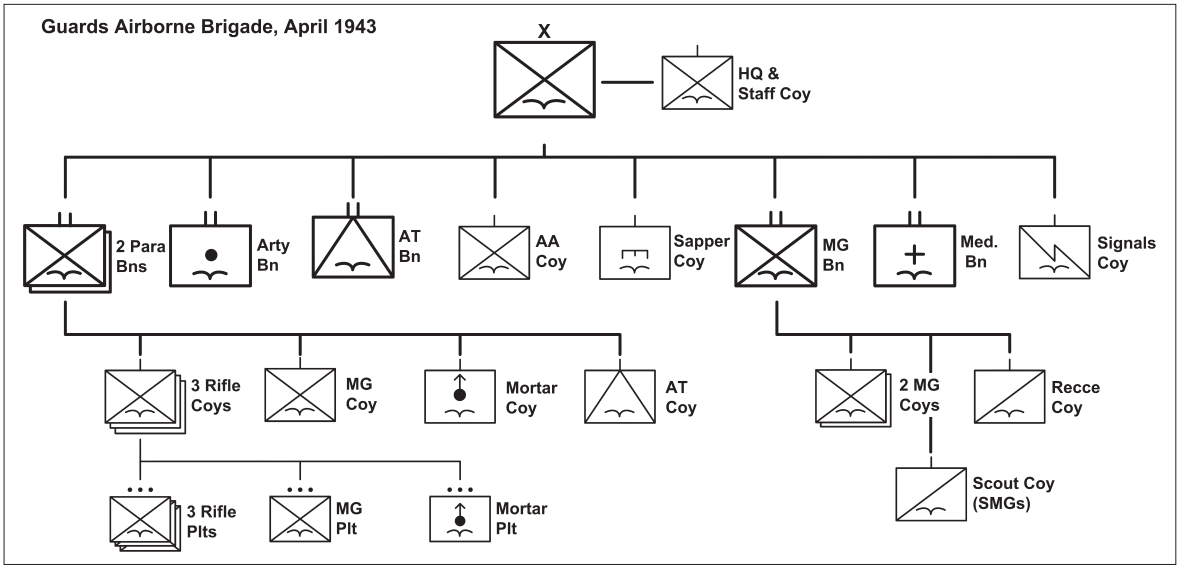
deal with it once and for all. Some small remnants of the 4th Airborne Corps and the two reinforcing airborne brigades escaped to Soviet lines by 21 June, but of the 14,000 paratroopers who had taken part in the operation, fewer than 2,000 survived, and most of those as prisoners or partisans. However heroic the defenders at Vyazma may have been, the annihilation of an entire airborne corps ensured that such ambitious undertakings were effectively at an end for the foreseeable future. With no prospect of large-scale airborne operations and the pressing need for ever more men (the disasters around Kharkov in the summer coupled with the need to fend off the German 6. Armee's advance on Stalingrad had stretched the Red Army to breaking point) meant that the ten airborne corps were certain to find themselves on the battlefield. By August, the original airborne corps had all been converted into Guards rifle divisions, with ten new airborne corps being raised in their place. By the end of 1942 those ten new airborne corps were themselves converted into Guards airborne divisions (*gvardeyskiye vozdushno-desantnyye divizii*), the term 'airborne' being only a reflection of their status, as in practice they would all fight as ground infantry.

DROPPING ON THE DNEPR

After the trials of 1942, the Soviet victory at Stalingrad in February 1943 gave the Red Army a little more room to breathe. The VDV went through yet another round of redesignation/reorganization, with seven new Guards airborne brigades (*gvardeyskiye vozdushno-desantnyye brigady*) raised in April 1943, and a further 13 on 4 June 1943. Within the Stavka there was an expectation that, now the Red Army had gone over onto the offensive, the chance for large-scale airborne operations would soon come, and they

GUARDS AIRBORNE BRIGADES, 1943–44	
Unit	**History**
1st	Formed in the Moscow Military District in April 1943; heavily engaged in the Dnepr airborne operation; became part of the 11th Guards Airborne Division on 23 December 1943.
2nd	Formed in the Moscow Military District in April 1943; became part of the 11th Guards Airborne Division on 23 December 1943.
3rd	Formed in the Moscow Military District in April 1943; participated in the Dnepr airborne operation after which it was placed in the reserves; disbanded in February 1944.
4th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in April 1943. After a brief spell on the South Front it returned to the Moscow Military District and became part of the 16th Guards Airborne Division in December 1943.
5th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in April 1943; mostly destroyed in the Dnepr airborne operation; quickly rebuilt and became part of the 12th Guards Airborne Division on 23 December 1943. Second formation in December 1944, but not deployed for the remainder of the war.
6th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in April 1943. After a brief spell on the South Front it returned to the Moscow Military District and became part of the 14th Guards Airborne Division on 23 December 1943.
7th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in April 1943. After a brief spell on the South Front it returned to the Moscow Military District and became part of the 16th Guards Airborne Division in December 1943.
8th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in May–June 1943; disbanded in February 1944. Second formation in December 1944.
9th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in May–June 1943. Became part of the 15th Guards Airborne Division in November 1943.
10th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in May–June 1943. Became part of the 15th Guards Airborne Division in November 1943.
11th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in June 1943. Assigned to the 1st Baltic Front in October 1943; returned to Moscow to become part of the 11th Guards Airborne Division on 23 December 1943.
12th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in June 1943. Became part of the 15th Guards Airborne Division in November 1943.
13th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in May–June 1943. Became part of the 14th Guards Airborne Division on 23 December 1943.
14th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in June 1943. Became part of the 12th Guards Airborne Division on 23 December 1943.
15th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in May–June 1943. Became part of the 12th Guards Airborne Division on 23 December 1943.
16th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in May–June 1943. Became part of the 14th Guards Airborne Division on 23 December 1943.
17th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in May–June 1943. Became part of the 16th Guards Airborne Division in December 1943.
18th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in May–June 1943. Became part of the 13th Guards Airborne Division on 20 December 1943.
19th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in May–June 1943. Became part of the 13th Guards Airborne Division on 20 December 1943.
20th	Formed in the Moscow Military District in May–June 1943. Became part of the 13th Guards Airborne Division on 20 December 1943.
24th	Formed in December 1944; part of the Stavka reserves until the war's end.

wanted to be ready. In the wake of the battle of Kursk (5 July–23 August 1943), the Red Army launched a pair of offensives that pushed the Germans back and put three Soviet armies within striking distance of the Dnepr River line, a significant obstacle to further progress. General armii Nikolai F. Vatutin, commander of the Voronezh Front, pressed his forces hard and advanced at nearly 100km per day, the leading element of his armies reaching the eastern bank of the Dnepr by the night of 21/22 September. By the end of 22 September, Vatutin had established three small impromptu bridgeheads on the western bank, but a lack of suitable bridging equipment (still several days behind due to the speed of the Soviet advance) meant that he could not get his tanks across, leaving the Soviet grip on their new gains vulnerable to counter-attack.



Raised in April 1943, a Guards airborne brigade (3,480 men, increased later that year to 4,281 men in part by increasing the artillery and anti-aircraft assets, as well as the addition of a tank battalion) had two 850-man parachute battalions, each of three rifle companies, a machine-gun company (six M1910 Maxim heavy machine guns), a mortar company (six 82mm) and an anti-tank company (27 14.5mm anti-tank rifles); a rifle company had a supporting machine-gun platoon (two M1910 Maxims) and a mortar platoon (two 50mm). The Guards airborne brigade's other assets included a machine-gun battalion (two machine-gun companies, each with six heavy machine guns, plus a reconnaissance company and a submachine-gun-armed scout company), an artillery battalion (eight 76mm howitzers and four 120mm mortars), an anti-aircraft company (six 12.7×108mm DShK heavy machine guns), an anti-tank battalion (eight 45mm or 47mm guns and 18 14.5mm anti-tank rifles), a sapper company, a medical battalion and a signals company.

The Stavka had anticipated the likelihood of an air assault as part of any probable attempt to force a crossing over the Dnepr and had been planning for just such an operation for several months, with the 1st, 3rd and 5th Guards Airborne brigades undergoing intensive training in anticipation, all three transferring to Vatutin's command in early September. The nearest bridgehead, at a bend in the river called Velikyi Bukrin, was the most suitable of the three for exploitation, the plan being to drop the three Guards airborne brigades on the western bank where they could expand the existing perimeter and thus keep German artillery out of range of the river. The operation was set for the night of 23/24 September, but logistical difficulties and bad weather meant that, yet again, the airlift capacity was far short of what it should have been, and due to rail delays the three Guards airborne brigades were late in concentrating at their airfields. The jump was pushed back to the night of 24/25 September, with the reduced airlift capacity dictating that only the 3rd and 5th Guards Airborne brigades would drop on the first night, the 1st Guards Airborne Brigade dropping on the following night.

The decision to push the jump back by a day, while necessary considering the fact that the units and their airlift were not fully in place, would have disastrous consequences. The Germans, fully aware of the need to drive the Soviet bridgeheads back across the Dnepr as quickly as possible, had dispatched 19. Panzer-Division to the area, where it was due to arrive on the evening of 24 September, around the same time as the first wave of the 3rd Guards Airborne Brigade's paratroopers. In addition, the divisions of XXII. Panzerkorps were currently retreating through what would soon be the landing zone of the 5th Guards Airborne Brigade, and there were two Waffen-SS formations (5. SS-Panzer-Division *Wiking* and 2. SS-Panzer-Division *Das Reich*) in the area as well. Poor weather resulted in cancelled or ineffective reconnaissance flights, so the men of the Soviet Guards airborne brigades had no idea what would be waiting below them when they jumped.

At about 1930hrs, the Li-2 transports of the 3rd Guards Airborne Brigade started arriving over their landing zone, flying at 600m in a long, drawn-

Soviet infantry attempt to make their way across the Dnepr River despite coming under enemy artillery fire, September 1943. The airborne operation would attempt to avoid exactly this scenario, deploying two Guards airborne brigades in a daring drop that would seize portions of the western bank of the river in a *coup de main*, opening the way for a significant river crossing by General armii Nikolai F. Vatutin's forces. In the event, less than two Guards airborne brigades were landed, and were badly scattered and mauled by the defenders. There would be no more large-scale Soviet airborne operations for the rest of the war. (TASS via Getty Images)

out open formation, one aircraft after another, their occupants jumping out straight into streaks of tracer fire, the magnesium-blaze glare of flares and lethal bursts of anti-aircraft fire from the guns of Panzergrenadier-Regiment 73. Well over a dozen planeloads of paratroopers jumped before the remainder moved away from the killing zone, and those who made it to the ground found the landing zone overrun with German infantry and armoured vehicles. The waves of the 5th Guards Airborne Brigade encountered conditions that were not much better – some men were dropped directly on 10. Panzergrenadier-Division, with predictably grim results; some went into the Dnepr and drowned; others found themselves on the east bank of the Dnepr – even though only one-third of the brigade was actually dropped as the transports ran out of fuel. The two Guards airborne brigades were scattered over a 30×90km area. Of the 4,575 paratroopers who jumped (out of an expected total of 6,600), over 692 were killed and 209 captured during that first night (Glantz 1984: 102), with many more becoming casualties in the subsequent days. Those that made it through the drop formed up as best they could, often proving themselves formidable adversaries in skirmishes or later on in the more significant engagements when the Germans went to great lengths to try to stamp them out, as at Vyazma. The bridgeheads held on, but the massive concentration of German military power that now confronted them ensured that there was to be no speedy crossing of the Dnepr.

Some of the issues of the Dnepr operation echoed those encountered at Vyazma the previous year. It proved extremely difficult to deliver the attacking force in a concentrated area over the shortest possible time period, one of the crucial elements for success during an opposed landing; inexperienced pilots and poor coordination between the airborne units

and their airlift caused numerous problems and resulted in many deaths. Skill in the logistics of assembling men, *matériel* and their airlift was sorely lacking. The need to push the operation back by a day caused all sorts of command-and-control problems within the two Guards airborne brigades, a sign of inexperience as well as systems that were not flexible enough to accommodate inevitable change. Intelligence failings had repercussions so serious that they alone could have blighted the success of the operation. No pathfinders were used, and radio communications were not properly planned or resourced. In addition, the Guards airborne brigades were mostly equipped only with small arms and light weapons, and had very limited mobility once on the ground. Despite all the pre-war innovations, the VDV did not have anywhere near the capacity required to air-land or drop sufficient support weapons and vehicles. Such a handicap was not much of an issue for small raiding forces, but when engaging highly mobile German combined-arms formations equipped with large numbers of armoured vehicles and heavy weapons, the outcome was unlikely to be favourable for the Soviet forces.

In the aftermath of the Dnepr operation, the majority of the existing Guards airborne brigades were reorganized once again in the closing days of 1943, this time into the 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th, 15th and 16th Guards Airborne divisions, though for most of them their status as air-landing troops was short-lived: all would either be redesignated as rifle infantry or serve in that role irrespective of their 'airborne' status. Indeed, the six new

B

DNEPR RIVER, 25 SEPTEMBER 1943

(1) *Razvedchik*, 3rd Guards Airborne Brigade

This *razvedchik* ('scout') has taken part in the disastrous airborne operation launched by the 3rd and 5th Guards Airborne brigades on 24–25 September 1943, an abortive attempt to establish a bridgehead on the western bank of the Dnepr River in the teeth of stiff German resistance. He wears an MKK (*maskirovochnyi kamuflirovannyi kostium*, 'masking camouflage suit'), an 'amoeba'-pattern two-piece suit with an integral hood and mesh visor that was designed to be worn over the soldier's uniform. First produced in 1937–38, the suits were issued to engineers, NKVD reconnaissance units and snipers, as well as airborne forces. There were differing versions of the amoeba-pattern two-piece sets manufactured in an attempt to match seasonal variations, as well as one-piece versions that came with or without the hood and visor. He is armed with an M91/30 PU sniping rifle: the best examples of Mosin-Nagant M91/30 bolt-action rifles were pulled off the production lines at the Tula Arsenal and tested for accuracy; those that passed muster were fitted with a 3.5× PU (*pritsel ukorochennyy* – 'shortened sight') 'scope. Though ranged out to 1,300m, most shots would likely be taken at 400–600m at most. The addition of the telescopic sight also blocked the feeding guide for stripper clips, forcing the user to reload the rifle with loose rounds.

(2) DP gunner, 5th Guards Airborne Brigade

This light-machine-gunner, having discarded his PD-41 parachute after a rough and muddy landing in a patch of boggy ground, has made it to one of the few nearby weapon containers where he has armed himself with a 7.62×54mmR DP light machine gun (*Pulemot Degtyarova Pekhotnyy*, 'Degtyaryov's infantry machine gun') and a bag of spare pan magazines. He still wears his M1940 jump overalls, as many *desantniki* continued to do once they were safely on the ground. The DP was developed in the mid-1920s and entered Red Army service in 1928. Informally known as 'Degtyaryov's record player' due to its distinctive 47-round pan magazine, it was not overly heavy (11.5kg when loaded) and was a generally reliable and popular weapon, though it could not match the belt-fed German MG 34 and MG 42 general-purpose machine guns in the sustained-fire role.

(3) *Starshina*, 5th Guards Airborne Brigade

This sergeant major does his best to rally his widely scattered men before they are overrun. He is armed with a 7.62×25mm PPS-43 (*Pistolet-pulemyot Sudayeva* – 'Sudayev's submachine gun'), an increasingly common weapon that, despite its rough and ready appearance, was an excellent submachine gun, both for the soldier and the state that produced it. The PPS-43 had a lower rate of fire than the PPSh-41, which meant it conserved ammunition, and used 35-round detachable box magazines, a notable improvement over the PPSh-41's 71-round drum that, despite its capacity, often had to be carefully matched to individual guns due to generally poor standards of manufacturing. The PPS-43 had no such issues, as well as being much cheaper and quicker to manufacture (the PPSh-41 needed 7.3 hours of machine time and 13.9kg of raw materials per gun, whereas the PPS-43 required only 2.7 hours of machine time and 6.2kg of raw materials per gun). He also carries an NR-40 fighting knife (*nosh razvedchika*, 'scout's knife'), a common sight among paratroopers, scouts and tank crewmen. Inspired by the Finnish *puukko*-style knives that were all the rage in the Soviet underworld of the 1920s and 1930s, the NR-40 was a popular and useful tool for troops whose weapons did not require a bayonet.

1
2
3

RIGHT
A presumably staged shot of Soviet soldiers entering a doorway, guns and grenades at the ready. Though it is not possible to determine if these men are paratroopers, they are dressed and armed in the same fashion as airborne troops would have been in the winter months of early 1942; they carry RGD-33 hand grenades and PPD-40 submachine guns. The RGD-33 (*Ruchnaya Granata Djakonova*, 'Dyakonov's Hand Grenade') had a blast radius of around 10m (15m if using a fragmentation sleeve – the example here does not have one), while the 7.62×25mm PPD-40 used 71-round drums or a (much less popular) 25-round detachable box magazine. (From the fonds of the RGAKFD in Krasnogorsk via Stavka)

FAR RIGHT
A section of PPS-43-armed *razvedchiki* ('scouts') undergo training sometime in 1943–44. They all wear baggy one-piece 'amoeba'-pattern camouflage overalls; the amoeba pattern was one of a variety of camouflage schemes used by the Red Army throughout the war, and though it was one of the earliest to be developed (in the late 1930s) it could still be seen in use as late as the 1950s. It was usually supplied to airborne units, snipers, engineers, reconnaissance units and forward artillery observers and was available as a one-piece overall or a set of jacket and trousers, with both the overall and the two-piece set meant to be worn over the existing uniform. It was usually made up of dark-green blotches over a lighter-green background (as in this example), but there were other iterations for different seasons such as brown-over-tan or brown-over-white versions. (From the fonds of the RGAKFD in Krasnogorsk via Stavka)

divisions would spend the rest of the war much as their predecessors in the 1st to 10th Guards Airborne divisions did, fighting as well-regarded Guards infantry formations. For example, on 19 January 1944, the 13th, 14th and 15th Guards Airborne divisions were reorganized into the 98th, 99th and 100th Guards Rifle divisions, all three serving together with distinction in the newly formed 37th Guards Rifle Corps on the Karelian Front. Such a rapid change from airborne to rifle infantry suggests that the formation of these new divisions was more of an administrative than a practical undertaking, that their establishments were nothing like what they should ideally be, and that their airborne capability was largely theoretical.

Three more Guards airborne divisions (37th, 38th and 39th) were raised in August 1944, eventually forming the Guards Airborne Army under the command of Ivan Zatevakhin of Khalkin-Gol fame, now a *general-mayor*. In a now well-established pattern, this force all too soon found itself redesignated as Guards infantry. There would be a number of smaller tactical airborne missions conducted in the final days of the war, with some of the largest occurring in East Asia in the immediate wake of Japan's collapse, though these were mostly unopposed. Time and again, new VDV formations would be raised, only to find themselves pressed into service as rifle infantry due to the Stavka's ceaseless need to keep the various Fronts supplied with manpower, after which the cycle of recruitment would begin once again. Though it had its own staff and administration, the VDV's senior ranks did not possess the operational experience of those who had been purged from the service before the war. Also, the fundamental instability afflicting units constantly being raised only to be converted into rifle infantry made it difficult for the Soviet airborne forces as a whole to develop any deep institutional knowledge, let alone the cadre of officers and men who would be necessary to understand and apply it. Finally, the relative dearth of large-scale operations meant that the VDV's planning and operational staff had little chance to build on what they learned. As the war's end approached, the idea of how airborne forces should be used remained more or less unchanged from the pre-war doctrine, but there seemed to be few among the high command who considered it much of a priority.

THE VDV IN THE COLD WAR

Although the airborne units converted into rifle divisions fought well during the Great Patriotic War, the exploits of the Soviet airborne branch itself were underwhelming. Fundamental issues with lift capacity were never really addressed, and the two major airborne operations that were conducted were hamstrung by far more than just poor logistics. That the VDV, from April 1946 under the command of the respected veteran General-polkovnik Vasily V. Glagolev, was not simply dissolved was likely due to a combination of factors, not least the successes enjoyed by the Allied airborne forces in Normandy, as well as the seriousness with which those now-strategic enemies developed their airborne capabilities after 1945. Moreover, the VDV's light-infantry role – useful for fighting in urban areas and inhospitable mountainous regions, both of which were a potential problem for a Soviet Army being rebuilt around large-scale mechanized formations – remained relevant.

The reorganized post-war force was established on 7 June 1946 and consisted of ten Guards airborne divisions (the 76th, 98th, 99th, 100th, 103rd, 104th, 105th, 106th, 107th and 114th) divided into five Guards airborne corps (the 8th, 15th, 37th, 38th and 39th). Despite being significantly larger than the airborne establishment of any other power, in 1952 the VDV was still assessed by the US Army's Military Intelligence Division as lacking experience in the coordination and control of operational-level exercises, as well as suffering from a shortage of transport aircraft and a very limited capacity to airlift heavy equipment (Zaloga 1995: 119).

Although victorious in the war, the Soviet Army undertook intense and prolonged analysis of battles both won and lost. Though the development of airborne doctrine and planning continued, including some ambitious strategic thinking, the reality was that during this time the airborne units were more or less unchanged from their role as Guards infantry. Post-war airborne divisions had a two-regiment structure with organic parachute and air-landed regiments, but were otherwise largely patterned after the TOE of

Airborne troops parade through Moscow beneath images of Stalin and other notable Communist Party leaders, May Day 1951. The end of the Great Patriotic War saw the VDV come under Red Army control, and although the airborne forces retained their specialized role they were almost indistinguishable from standard motor-rifle infantry. (Mondadori Portfolio by Getty Images)

ordinary rifle divisions without their integral heavy components (the tank and self-propelled artillery regiments). The chief of staff for airborne troops in the 1970s, General-leytenant Pavel F. Pavlenko, observed that due to their lack of heavy weapons and still relatively poor lift capacity the role of airborne forces would be limited to 'landing in limited regions, [and] securing and holding objectives until the arrival of main front forces. Missions were thus passive. The depth of landings did not exceed 20 to 100 kilometers, and the length of independent combat action was comparatively short. Air transport of that time, the IL-12 and IL-14 aircraft [*sic*] were able to land only personnel with light weapons, including 82-mm mortars' (quoted in Glantz 1984: 138).

Pavlenko's comment was made despite one of the more important post-war developments: in the late 1940s, the VDV's existing air-support units were reorganized into a new formation known as the TDA (*Transportno-Desantnaya Aviatsiya*, 'Air-Landing Aviation Branch'). The TDA used new aircraft such as the Tupolev Tu-4 bomber (for air-dropping the P-90 parachute container) from 1948, the Ilyushin Il-12D (with capacity for 38 paratroopers or 3,700kg of cargo), also from 1948, and the Ilyushin Il-14T (with capacity for 36 paratroopers or *c*.5,600kg of cargo) from 1953. The TDA had a total of around 450 aircraft under its command, with each airborne division being assigned 45 aircraft on a permanent basis – not enough for serious combat exercises or deployment, but sufficient to allow integration with the TDA personnel as well as regular parachute and air-landing training. For larger-scale endeavours or in time of war, the TDA could expand its capacity by drawing on Aeroflot (the state airline), which was expected to provide up to 1,000 further civilian Il-12s and Il-14s as needed (Zaloga 1995: 119-120). As Pavlenko observed, much more would be needed if the VDV was to regain its strategic importance in 'deep' operations.

In an attempt to enhance the VDV's prestige, from August 1951 all officers (including those of general rank) were encouraged to be qualified parachutists, those who did so gaining more favourable pension terms, and there were also lump sums paid out to long-serving officers. Ranks of command were also raised one grade, so a platoon commander (*leytenant*) would now be a *starshiy leytenant*, a company commander (*kapitan*) would now be a *mayor*, and a battalion commander (*podpolkovnik*) would now be a *polkovnik*, while for the NCOs and men there would be 15 days' leave and an increase in the daily ration allowance (Shaykin 2013: 97–98).

By the beginning of 1949, the Soviet airborne forces had expanded to 15 Guards airborne divisions in five Guards airborne corps: the 8th (103rd, 114th and 7th Guards Airborne divisions), 15th (76th, 104th and 21st), 37th (98th, 99th and 13th), 38th (105th, 106th and 11th) and 39th (100th, 107th and 31st). The 7th Guards Airborne Division was formed in 1948, while the 21st, 13th, 11th and 31st Guards Airborne divisions all seem to have been established around a similar time from cadres of existing parachute regiments. Prior to January 1949 all the regiments of the airborne divisions were still referred to as rifle units, but after the reorganization the regimental designation changed to *parashyutno-desantnyy polk* ('parachute-landing regiment', hereafter 'parachute regiment').

The VDV underwent a further reorganization, this time aimed at making it more responsive and better able to respond to the sort of 'deep' operations that would be conducted on a nuclear battlefield that were currently under development by the Soviet Army's high command. On 10 February 1955, the 11th, 13th, 21st and 100th Guards Airborne divisions were disbanded, with

the 99th and 114th following in June 1956 and the 31st and 107th in 1959. All the Guards airborne corps were disbanded as well, the 15th, 38th and 39th on 25 April 1955, and the 8th and 37th in the following year. Henceforward, the remaining seven Guards airborne divisions (the 7th, 76th, 98th, 103rd, 104th, 105th and 106th) would operate as semi-autonomous units under the direct strategic control of the high command. On 17 September 1960, the 44th Training Airborne Division (*uchebnaya vozdushno-desantnaya diviziya*) was formed, tasked with providing education for NCOs, junior leaders and specialists.

In April 1953, the Guards airborne divisions returned to a three-regiment structure (except the 103rd and 114th), and around this time were also given an expanded TOE to improve their resilience on the modern battlefield. Though vehicles were still in short supply, the development of the 57mm ASU-57, a self-propelled assault gun designed for anti-tank defence as opposed to infantry support, significantly expanded the firepower of airborne units (a 1956-era division fielding a battery of 12 of them). Other improvements included the development of the 82mm B-10 recoilless rifle (and the subsequent 107mm B-11), as well as improved radio pathfinding and communications equipment. Despite such advances, a US Army study of 1958 stated that 'The lack of armor and heavy caliber artillery in the airhead, however, must still be compensated for by close support ground attack aircraft and early linkup with friendly forces' (quoted in Glantz 1984: 139). Such new tools were tested in airborne exercises; although those conducted in this period were usually no larger than battalion-level affairs, there were two drops in 1955 – one conducted by the 108th Guards Parachute Regiment near the Byelorussian city of Dyatlovo, and another conducted by the 119th Guards Parachute Regiment in concert with naval forces on the island of Saaremaa off the Estonian coast – that showed more ambition and success than many of those that had gone before.

In May 1954, General-polkovnik Vasily F. Margelov was appointed to be *komanduishchi* ('commander-in-chief') of the VDV. For the VDV he would prove to be the right man at the right time. He brought energy and intellectual verve to his new post, as well as the desire to see the airborne divisions develop into an elite force once again, a force that would become one of the Soviet Union's most important strategic assets in any new war. One of Margelov's most valuable contributions to the VDV would be his enhancement of the view that all privilege was earned. In the pre-war years, the airborne forces had been a remarkable institution by any standards of the day, its levels of training, expertise and commitment ensuring that the men who served in it could rightly consider themselves an elite force. The expansions, losses and redesignations during the Great Patriotic War had necessarily taken a toll on the VDV's sense of itself, something reinforced by the lacklustre approach to its development and use after 1945. Margelov's arrival changed much of that. He saw the VDV as an elite force, encouraging his men to wear the striped blue *telnyashka* undershirt (originally worn by Soviet naval infantry and adopted by Margelov during his leadership of one such unit in the war) as a visible sign of their status. In addition, he led by example in establishing a code of behaviour that celebrated hard work, achievement and integrity among all ranks, giving the VDV a strong sense of self-respect that derived from an individual's abilities and personal efforts rather than some pre-existing privilege (Schofield 1993: 43). This approach not only fostered the ambitious attitudes and drive necessary in an elite force, but also insulated it somewhat from the more stultifying long-term effects of the Soviet system (such as patronage and corruption) which would again become endemic throughout much of the Soviet Army in the coming decades.

A Byelorussian who joined the RKKA in 1928, Vasily F. Margelov led a ski battalion during the Winter War of 1939–40, a naval infantry regiment in 1941–44, and a Guards rifle division in 1944–45; wounded six times, he was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. Appointed commander of the 37th Guards Rifle Svirsky Red Banner Corps, his reputation for being as tough on himself as he was on his subordinates was made evident by his insistence that every member of the corps be a qualified parachutist. Margelov commanded the VDV during 1954–59 and 1961–79, the two-year hiatus coming as a result of his temporary demotion. The story went that during his 51st birthday party he encouraged an NCO to wrestle a pet bear; a report of the incident leaked out and his superiors were unimpressed (Schofield 1993: 33). Conversely, the Russian historian Viktor Suvorov attributes his demotion to a scandalous gang-rape committed by members of the 1140th Guards Artillery Regiment, a VDV unit. In spite of such reverses, Margelov's attitude and drive were fundamental to the formation of the Soviet Union's airborne forces; he is rightly seen as the father of the VDV. (Mil.ru/ Wikimedia/CC BY 4.0)

HUNGARY 1956

November 1956 would see the first significant use of Soviet airborne forces since the end of the Great Patriotic War. Their deployment was partly due to their perceived reliability (the VDV was overwhelmingly Slavic, unlike many other Soviet Army units that suffered from ethnic tensions, and the VDV had its pick of new recruits), as well as their light-infantry capabilities, mobility and elite status. The flashpoint was Hungary, which had rapidly moved from being a relatively reliable satellite state to a country in the midst of an open rebellion against Soviet control.

This was not the first of the new Communist Bloc's teething troubles; on 17 June 1953, internal dissent against the Stalinist-inspired domestic policies of the DDR (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, 'German Democratic Republic' aka East Germany) had led that government to violently suppress an uprising of workers, relying heavily on Soviet troops to help them regain order. After 1945 the Soviet Union had ensured its influence over the Eastern Bloc countries it had occupied in all but name by retaining control of the interior and defence ministries of individual nations, stationing Soviet troops within their borders to help 'maintain stability', as well as keeping a tight rein on any form of political expression that could be considered dissident or contrary to the interests of Moscow. In October 1956, some stirrings of political reform were emerging from Poland, and though these were quickly quashed they encouraged a similar wave of resistance to break out among Hungarian students of the Budapest University of Technology on 22 October, calling for the reinstatement of the ex-Prime Minister Imre Nagy. A little more

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VDV PARATROOPERS, 1952–60

(1) *Desantnik*, 337th Guards Parachute Regiment, 1952

The VDV's post-war uniform was, like that worn by most of the rest of the Red Army, barely distinguishable from those worn in the latter years of the Great Patriotic War, one of the few notable features being the VDV insignia sleeve patch he wears on his left arm, first introduced in 1947. One significant change did arrive, however – the paratrooper's main weapon, in this case an AKS-47 (*Avtomat Kalashnikova Skladnoy*, 'Kalashnikov's Automatic Folding Rifle'). Inspired in part by the German StG 44 assault rifle, this is the Type II variant, produced during 1951–57. The first models had a stamped receiver, but Soviet manufacturing technology was not quite good enough to produce parts to the required quality, so they switched to a milled version instead (the Type II), which was much stronger but also heavier; by 1955, advances allowed the Soviet factories to go back to a (cheaper, lighter and quicker to manufacture) stamped receiver, which would continue until the AKM assault rifle made its debut in 1959. From the very beginning, all the Kalashnikov types had an under-folding stock variant specifically designed for troops such as those of the VDV who were expected to operate in restricted environments. Chambered for the intermediate 7.62×39mm cartridge and with a 30-round magazine, the AK-47 was effective out to at least 400m, delivering a step-change in the firepower of the individual soldier.

(2) Grenadier, 108th Guards Parachute Regiment, Hungary, 1956

The *desantnik* is a member of the 108th Guards Parachute Regiment from the 7th Guards Airborne Division, his unit being one of several airborne assault groups tasked with putting down the Hungarian Uprising of June–November 1956 as part of Operation *Vikhr'* ('Whirlwind'). He is one of a select number of soldiers in his regiment to be equipped with the new RPG-2 (*Ruchnoy Protivotankovy Granatomyot*, 'Hand-held Antitank Grenade Launcher'). Firing out to a maximum range of 200m, the 82mm PG-2 HEAT warhead could penetrate 180mm of armour, more than enough to defeat any main battle tank it was likely to encounter. The weapon could be operated by a single soldier, though Soviet doctrine called for the RPG-2 to be deployed in two-man teams consisting of a grenadier and an assistant who carried three extra HEAT rounds.

(3) Light-machine-gunner, 381st Guards Parachute Regiment, 1960

The paratrooper is from the 381st Guards Parachute Regiment (part of the 31st Guards Airborne Division) and is moving into position during a reconnaissance exercise. He wears the one-piece KLMK overall (*kamuflirovannyi letnyi maskirovochnyi kombinezon*, 'summer camouflage deceptive overalls') and face mask, newly issued to paratroopers in 1960. The hood could be worn over the helmet and the separate face mask was an evolution from the earlier Great Patriotic War-vintage suits that relied on an integrated mesh veil. He carries an RPD (*Ruchnoy Pulemyot Degtyaryova*, 'Degtyaryov's hand-held machine gun'), which was just on the cusp of being replaced by the new RPK that had been adopted in 1959. The successor to the Great Patriotic War's DP, the 7.62×54mmR RPD was a belt-fed weapon (the belt being stored in the metal drum attached to the receiver, which was technically a container rather a magazine) with a rate of fire of 650–750rd/min. It was an effective and reliable squad light machine gun.

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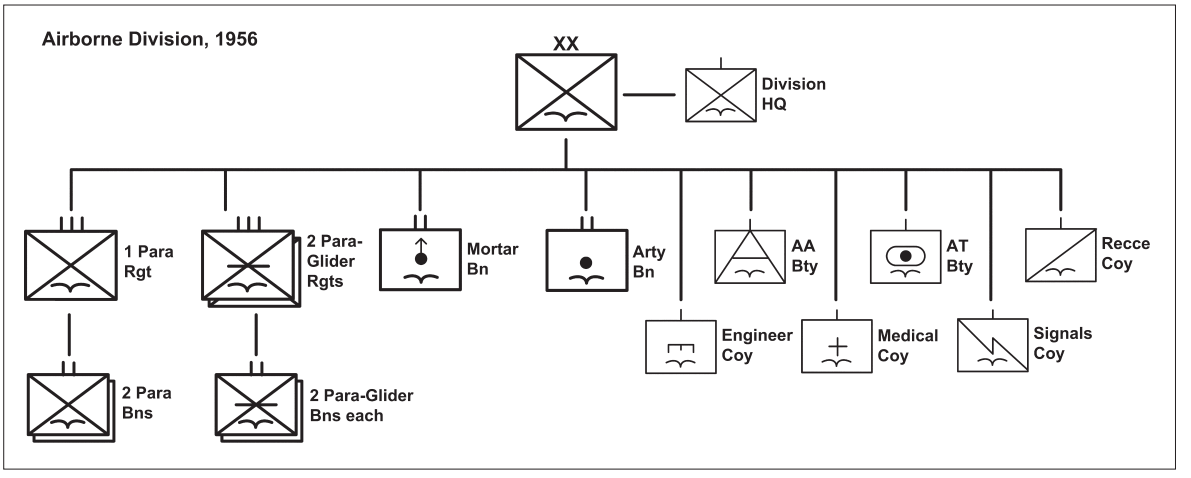

An airborne division in 1956 (8,485 men) had three parachute regiments (one parachute-landing and two parachute and glider-landing, all of 1,093 men each), a mortar battalion (24 120mm and 160mm), an artillery battalion (70 82mm B-10 recoilless rifles), an anti-aircraft battery (six 37mm guns and 18 14.5mm ZPU), a self-propelled anti-tank battery (12 57mm ASU-57s) and reconnaissance, engineer, medical and signals companies. Prior to 1951, the main gilder employed was the Tsybin Ts-25, after which the Yakovlev Yak-14 began entering service; the new glider could land a cargo of 3,500kg, with payloads including either a 57mm gun, a 76mm gun, a 122mm howitzer or a 160mm mortar (each with a GAZ-67B tractor). It could also transport BTR-40 armoured personnel carriers and the ASU-57 self-propelled assault gun.

than a year previously, on 14 May 1955, the Warsaw Pact had come into being, and any resistance to the overarching political and social hegemony was a threat to the stability of the pact as whole, as well as Hungary in particular. The Soviet premier Nikita S. Khrushchev had handled the crisis in Poland with the Soviet version of kid gloves (threatening to surround Warsaw with troops before coming to a compromise that avoided all-out conflict). In Hungary, things would be different.

The fires started by the initial student uprising spread with surprising speed, quickly taking on the character of a full-blown revolution after the first clumsy attempts by Soviet motor-rifle troops to regain control; Nagy, now re-installed in power, threw in his lot with the rebels and announced Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact on 1 November. This was intolerable to Moscow, and the decision was quickly taken to use all necessary force to bring the rebellion to heel; Khrushchev left the details up to Minister of Defence Marshal Georgy K. Zhukov, whose plan – *Vikhr'* ('Whirlwind') – called for broad strokes from the Soviet Army through the country, with a more directed effort aimed at Budapest to crush the heart of the uprising. The Soviet soldiers who were already in the capital were mostly conscript motor-rifle troops and had shown little enthusiasm in street-fighting with determined insurgents, so Zhukov decided that the VDV, politically reliable, well-trained and aggressive, would be suitable for the job. Two Guards airborne divisions had been readying themselves since 19 October on the chance that things would indeed take a turn for the worse.

Local control of the operation fell to Marshal Ivan S. Konev, who liaised with Zhukov and the Soviet commander in Budapest. The VDV units assigned to *Vikhr'* were from the 7th and 31st Guards Airborne divisions: the 7th's 108th Guards Parachute Regiment (*gvardeyskiy parashyutno-desantnyy polk*) was staging out of Vilnius and Kaunus (in Lithuania and Latvia respectively), while the division's other regiment – the 80th – was at Beregovo in Ukraine; both regiments of the 31st Guards Airborne Division were assembled at airfields in western Ukraine. The 108th was a good example of a parachute regiment of the period: it was a little understrength with 1,046 troops available, 12 82mm mortars, 18 B-10 recoilless rifles, six ZPU-2 AA machine guns, 81 of the new RPG-2 rocket grenade launchers, and 14 GAZ-67 and GAZ-69 trucks (Zaloga 1995: 138).

On 30 October, the 31st Guards Airborne Division's two parachute regiments (the 114th and 381st) air-landed at Veszprém Airport, which was by Lake Balaton and near some significant Hungarian Army units, in anticipation of *Vikhr'*. The 80th Guards Parachute Regiment flew in to Tököl Airport in the suburbs of Budapest on the evening of 3 November to ensure that its anti-aircraft batteries had been silenced, followed by the 108th Guards Parachute Regiment. The order for the operation to commence was given just before dawn on the morning of 4 November: the 31st Guards Airborne Division overran the Hungarian positions at Veszprém, while the 80th Guards Parachute Regiment and 150 men from the 108th moved into Budapest and engaged in often heavy street-fighting. The local insurgents, mostly disorganized civilians with a motley collection of arms, fought hard, but they were hopelessly overmatched and by 7 November the bulk of the fighting in Budapest was over, the two Guards airborne divisions of paratroopers suffering a total of 97 dead and 265 wounded. In military terms *Vikhr'* was more or less a walkover, but the VDV's spirit and commitment (in stark contrast to several other Soviet units engaged in suppressing the rebellion) won it plaudits and the approval of the Soviet General Staff.

OPERATING IN A NUCLEAR WORLD

The death of Joseph V. Stalin on 5 March 1953 saw a gradual loosening of the suffocating strictures that had ossified society and the armed forces in the Soviet Union since the end of the Great Patriotic War. It was becoming clear that any likely future war with the United States and its western European NATO allies would be conducted on battlefields that were defined by the use of tactical nuclear weapons. In such a world, tightly controlled combat formations supporting dense layers of defensive fortifications would be a thing of the past; an enemy would have to disperse his forces to ensure their survival, making the post-strike breakthrough and deep penetration much more likely to succeed. The expectation was that highly mobile tank and motorized forces would break through the main line of defence and exploit the damage done by Soviet rocket forces before the enemy had time to marshal his resources. Such warfare required a more responsive and mobile army, a force specifically designed around the strategic opportunities generated by tactical nuclear war. This drive to modernize was led by Marshal Zhukov, who initiated the process of change in 1954 with a reorganization of ground forces that would continue into the early 1960s.

The immediate disruption caused by a nuclear strike would create a situation ripe for exploitation, but the reality was that tank and motor-rifle formations, faced with the likelihood of needing to cover 100–200km of ground after breaking through the front lines, could not move quickly enough to guarantee success. Airborne forces could provide the answer. An air-landing could take place very soon after the initial strike, likely well before the enemy would be in any state to react and certainly before the armoured formations of the Soviet Army could arrive. General-polkovnik Dmitry S. Sukhorukov, commander of the VDV from January 1979 to June 1987, observed that in addition, 'airborne forces could undertake new missions, such as destroying enemy nuclear delivery means, bases, and warehouses for nuclear weapons, etc. They retained the missions of cooperating with the ground forces in securing administrative and industrial centers of the enemy, seizing crossings and bridgeheads on wide water obstacles, mountain passes and any difficult area to access' (quoted in Glantz 1984: 145).

To be effective in such a role, it would be necessary to expand the VDV's offensive power, mobility and airlift capabilities. For Margelov, this entailed the evolution of the VDV from a primarily light-infantry force into a mechanized one, a move that would require a step-change in the doctrine and equipment of the airborne divisions, not the least of which would be the development of a consistent and flexible airlift capacity. Almost from the beginning of serious air-landing operations, the Soviets had been considering methods by which they might increase the mobility of paratroopers on the ground. Bicycles were delivered as part of an air-landing force as early as 1930, quickly followed by motorcycles and even parachute-delivered Ford Model A cars that mounted DT machine guns, culminating in a pair of 1932 test drops of a 2,700kg T-27 tankette. Such experiments continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s, but were ultimately always hamstrung by the technological limitations of the aircraft employed. With such a history, the scale of Margelov's aspiration in the mid-1950s was daunting, but there were positive signs on the horizon. Technology was finally starting to catch up with ambition, and the development of several transport aircraft specifically designed for military purposes was coming to fruition at just the right time.

The year 1955 saw the formation of the VTA (*Voyenno-Transportnaya Aviatsiya*, 'Military Transport Aviation Service'), which managed the distribution of the new aircraft to the VDV Guards airborne divisions. The Antonov An-2 was introduced in 1957: a supremely rugged multi-purpose biplane that could take 12 passengers or a cargo of 1,500kg; by 1959, each airborne division had its own squadron. The twin-turboprop Antonov An-8 entered service in 1958 (a capacity of 40 paratroopers or 11,000kg of cargo), with the An-12, the aircraft that would become the workhorse of the VDV for the next few decades, arriving soon after in 1959 (a capacity of 60 paratroopers or 90 soldiers or 21,000kg of cargo) and the even larger An-22 (150 paratroopers or 290 soldiers or 80,000kg of cargo) appearing in 1967. Aside from the significant increase in men and cargo that could be moved over a vastly increased range – 5,500km, in the case of the An-12 – the new transport aircraft were large enough to accommodate moderately sized vehicles, and could either air-land them or air-drop them on specialized cargo pallets. By 1967 the picture had changed so much that the VDV was able to drop an entire Guards airborne division (the 76th) in a single lift, the largest such exercise conducted in the Soviet Union up to that point, and the largest in Europe since Arnhem.

With airlift now capable of moving not just men but substantial numbers of armoured vehicles and guns, the VDV began to equip itself for its new role. The 85mm ASU-85 self-propelled gun would replace the undergunned ASU-57, and a host of other vehicles and weapon systems would join it in the new TOE, including BTR-40 armoured personnel carriers, BRDM-1 armoured scout cars, first-generation ATGM systems such as the 3m6 *Shmel* ('Bumblebee'), the 85mm anti-tank gun D-48 and 85mm anti-tank gun SD-44, the ZIS-3 76mm divisional gun M1942, the 140mm BM-14 multiple rocket launcher, the 122mm towed howitzer D-30, GAZ-63 and GAZ-69 trucks, and support vehicles such as the GAZ-66, KAMAZ-4310 and ZiL-131. Towards the end of the 1960s, Soviet parachute regiments were fielding anti-tank units equipped with four 9P122 armoured cars (a BRDM-2 armed with six 9M14M 'Malyutka-M' ATGMs mounted on the hull superstructure), and were just starting to take delivery of the BMD-1,

A VDV officer or NCO with a B-10 recoilless-rifle team to his right observes a line of paratroopers and 57mm ASU-57 assault guns (*Aviadesantnaya Samokhodnaya Ustanovka*, 'airborne self-propelled mount') during an exercise, likely sometime in the mid-1950s. The ASU-57 entered service in 1951 and was specifically designed to work with paratroopers in the infantry-support role. Capable of being air-dropped from Antonov An-12 transport aircraft, it was an early example of the Soviet desire to provide greater punch to their airborne divisions, though its thin armour and underpowered 57mm gun meant that it was gradually superseded by the 85mm ASU-85 self-propelled gun from the end of the 1950s onwards. The B-10 recoilless rifle was an 82mm anti-tank weapon that fired HEAT shells out to a maximum range of 4,500m, giving lightly armed airborne units a much-needed medium-range defence against enemy armour. (Sputnik/TopFoto)

an amphibious tracked infantry fighting vehicle that, in spite of its design problems, increased force mobility, firepower and protection.

The main post-war airborne training manual was issued in 1952 and would be succeeded by the RVDP-63 (*Rukovodstvo po vozdushno-desantnoy podgotovke VDV*, 'Airborne Training Manual') in 1963. While the military environment in which the 1952 regulations were published was rather moribund, much changed in the succeeding 11 years. The new manual contained detailed sections on every aspect of parachuting that the trainee would need to know, including all the current airframes in use and how to jump from them, and the different types of exercises that parachutists would undergo (including jumps at night, over water and involving delayed opening), as well as the methods for organizing and conducting jumps. Another section covered the preparation, packing and storage of cargo, including multi-parachute items, while the paratrooper's personal weapons and equipment (including the RD-54 backpack) were also detailed. The manual was prefaced by a set of instructions for officers, mostly practical guidance in delineating their responsibilities around the maintenance and use of parachute equipment, encouraging them to be hands-on at every stage of the process: 'The commander of a battalion (division) is obliged: to know perfectly the airborne equipment, the rules for its operation and the requirements of the Airborne Training Manual; to regularly conduct classes with the officers of the battalion (division) in airborne training in order to improve their methodological skills; to constantly know the level of preparedness of the personnel of the battalion for airborne training; to lead the training of personnel in parachute jumping and ensure that the aerodrome is organized so as to allow careful monitoring of the readiness of parachutists preparing to jump; to lead in the preparation of airborne containers, military equipment and cargo for landing; to analyse the performed parachute jumps and take measures to eliminate the shortcomings and errors of the parachutists identified during their jumps; [and] to systematically check the storage and technical condition of the parachute landing equipment located in the battalion (division)' (Dukachev 1963: 27).

CZECHOSLOVAKIA 1968

The year 1968 was one of political upheaval throughout most of Western Europe, but also in the Warsaw Pact country of Czechoslovakia, where the leader of that nation's Communist party, First Secretary Alexander Dubček, had attempted to initiate a series of political reforms that became known as the 'Prague Spring'. Dubček's reforms began in January, almost immediately after his appointment, and were viewed with increasing dismay by Moscow. Fearing the spread of similar ideas to other states, the Soviet premier Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev instigated negotiations in July to try to rein in the Czechs, while also planning for a more direct resolution to the problem. Warsaw Pact manoeuvres had been scheduled to take place in Czechoslovakia that September; the Soviets tried to bring them forward to June, a move that would have allowed them a perfect excuse to flood the country with troops, but the Czechs refused, resulting in a series of staff exercises being held instead. The Soviets used those exercises as an opportunity to finalize their invasion plans.

Though the situation in Czechoslovakia was not anywhere near as violent or rebellious as that in Hungary some 12 years before, there was one factor that made any military operation against the country a more

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PRAGUE, 21 AUGUST 1968

(1) *Leytenant*, 7th Guards Airborne Division

The *leytenant* is leading a reconnaissance detachment of the 7th Guards Airborne Division during Operation *Dunay* ('Danube'), the Soviet *coup de main* that stifled the 'Prague Spring' protests of January–August 1968. He wears a red beret, a recent innovation for airborne and reconnaissance troops that Vasily F. Margelov, commander of the VDV, intended to help foster pride in the corps and which was authorized in June 1967, being issued from that summer onwards. Although the red beret had a long association with airborne troops of many nations, it soon fell out of favour in Soviet circles, perhaps for its very ubiquity among Western paratroop units. Soon enough a cornflower-blue beret would start to appear, its colour harking back to the pale-blue helmets that had been a feature of the VDV's early summer war games of the 1930s (Zaloga 1995: 152). His main weapon is an AKMS assault rifle, an updated version of the AKS-47 that used the same 7.62×39mm cartridge and magazines. His sidearm is a Makarov semi-automatic pistol; introduced in 1951 as a replacement for the TT, the Makarov was a simple blowback pistol that was robust, reliable and easy to maintain. Chambered in a proprietary 9×18mm cartridge, it had an eight-round magazine and was intended as a personal defence weapon for troops who were not issued with assault rifles. It served as the main sidearm for tank crews, air crews, officers, military police and members of special-forces units.

(2) Paratrooper, 108th Guards Parachute Regiment

The *desantnik* is a member of the 2nd Paratrooper Assault Company from the 108th Guards Parachute Regiment, 7th Guards Airborne Division. He wears the M65 uniform, the first significant departure from the *gymnasterka* that had been in use in one form or another since the late 19th century. The cornflower-blue collar tabs and shoulder straps clearly mark him out from the rest of the Soviet Army's infantry, as does his airborne patch worn on the upper left sleeve. The striped blue *telnyashka* undershirt, another of Margelov's morale-boosting innovations, can be seen underneath the jacket's open collar. He carries a 7.62×39mm AKMSL assault rifle, the modernized version of the AKS-47 that had been adapted to allow the mounting of optics and night sights to a specially designed bracket that was fitted to the left-hand side of the rifle's receiver. The AKMSL also had a distinctive, specially designed flash-hider that was necessary to mitigate the muzzle flash that would otherwise interfere with the operation of night-vision optics. The sight is an NSP-2 (*Nochnoy Strelkovyy Pritsel*, 'rifle night sight'), a refinement of the first-generation 1950s-era NAP-1 and readily recognizable due to the large infra-red illuminator disk over the sight's scope. The NSP-2 was powered by a separate battery pack that the user wore attached to his belt, and despite its cumbersome nature and high bore axis, not to mention its weight (the sight was 2.9kg and the battery pack a further 2kg), it proved to be a useful tool.

(3) PK gunner, 108th Guards Parachute Regiment

The gunner, also from the 108th Guards Parachute Regiment's 2nd Paratrooper Assault Company, carries his unit's PK general-purpose machine gun. Introduced in 1961, the belt-fed 7.62×54mmR PK (*Pulemyot Kalashnikova*, 'Kalashnikov's machine gun'), together with its 1969 upgrade the PKM (*Modernizirovany*, 'Modernized'), would prove itself to be among the best machine guns in the world, with a winning combination of reliability, ruggedness and ease of use. Mikhail T. Kalashnikov and his team had learned a great deal during their development of the AKM, and all those lessons were applied to the PK, relying on stamped parts to make production both quick and cheap, as well as borrowing many of the tried-and-tested design elements from the assault rifle. Though it still used the 7.62×54mmR cartridge (and the same metal non-disintegrating belts that fed the M1910 Maxim heavy machine gun), a well-thought-through feed system ensured that the cartridge rims weren't an issue. The PK had a rate of fire of 650rd/min and was effective out to 1,000m (further with suitable optics); it could be employed from its integral bipod or fixed to a tripod for a sustained-fire role.

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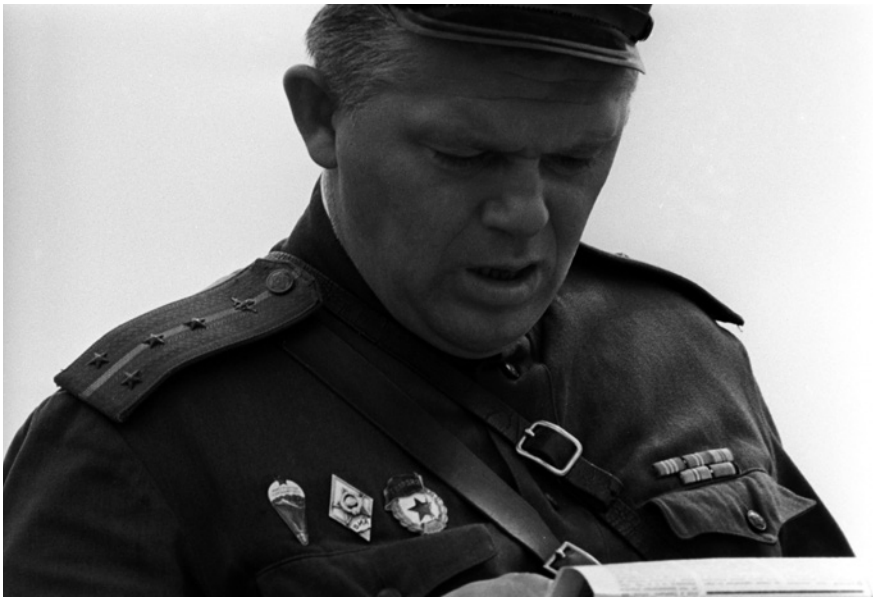


A VDV *kapitan* pictured during the immediate aftermath of the suppression of the 'Prague Spring', 23 August 1968. He wears the VDV insignia on his shoulder boards; the boards were usually red with a central gold stripe, but could be cornflower blue, although such a colour scheme was not formally adopted until 1969. His badges are (from left to right) a paratrooper's qualification jump badge (likely the 1955 2nd pattern), a graduation badge from a military academy, and a Guards unit badge. (Sputnik/TopFoto)

daunting prospect. The Hungarian Army of 1956 had been something of a ramshackle affair, poorly equipped and beset by weak leadership, whereas the CSLA (*Československá lidová armada*, 'Czechoslovak People's Army') was one of the most modern and professional forces within the Warsaw Pact, officered by men who knew their business and whose loyalty to socialism (read: Moscow) could not be absolutely guaranteed. Facing such a potentially dangerous enemy, any invasion would have to be one of devastating power that would strike at all the main elements of state and military command and control in one go; only with the leadership completely neutralized could the Soviets be reasonably confident that the CSLA would find discretion to be the better part of valour and remain in its barracks (Zaloga 1995: 157).

The operation would be known as *Dunay* ('Danube'). As early as 8 April, Margelov received orders to begin preparations, putting the 7th and 103rd Guards Airborne divisions on alert – the 7th would be tasked with assaulting political objectives in Prague, while the 103rd would drop and air-land on three separate CSLA headquarters (1st Army, 4th Army and the Western Military District). The airborne incursions would be part of a much larger attack that would see four Warsaw Pact armies totalling over 250,000 men and 2,000 tanks cross Czechoslovakia's borders in three main thrusts converging on the capital, ideally overwhelming any attempt at resistance before it could even begin to form. Everything was ready by 18 August, when the operation was formally authorized – the key objectives of the invasion would be the responsibility of a small number of Spetsnaz operators (*Voyska spetsialnogo naznacheniya*, 'Special Purpose Forces') and the two divisions of the VDV.

An Antonov An-24 with civilian markings landed at Ruzyně International Airport on the western outskirts of Prague at approximately 2030hrs on the evening of Monday 20 August, followed a few hours later by another An-24 filled with plain-clothes KGB officers who met with Czech security officers loyal to Moscow; the main runway was secured, and the airport closed to civilian flights at midnight. A pair of

OPPOSITE LEFT
VDV troopers collect weapons in Prague, 1968. They appear to be armed with AKS-47 assault rifles (judging by the muzzle nut on the soldier's weapon) and wear the *pilotka* cap rather than the beret (the older headgear was still a common sight among all Soviet forces, and would continue in use well into the 1980s). Note also the use of jump overalls, the striped blue *telnyashka* undershirts, and the unusual shape of the canteen on the left soldier's belt – a design that was specific to the VDV. (Sputnik/TopFoto)

An-12 transports landed at 0337hrs, disgorging troops drawn from the 8th Spetsnaz Brigade who secured the rest of the airport in anticipation of the main force, which soon began landing in a steady convoy of An-12s, each one only 30 seconds apart. Within an hour of the main force's arrival, several columns of paratroopers using requisitioned local vehicles supported by BRDM-2s and ASU-85s were striking out into the city, where they captured Dubček and the majority of his government without fuss. Other key features such as the city's main bridges, the Old Town, the radio station on Vinhradska Street, and the excellent vantage point of Letná Hill were seized, on the last of which they installed some ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft guns. There was some desultory resistance, but it was nothing like the vicious street-fighting that had characterized the assault on Budapest the previous decade. The troops of the 103rd enjoyed similarly bloodless victories in their assault, the end result being that the military and civilian authorities of Czechoslovakia were all in the bag before the CSLA or the population at large had any idea what was happening. Surprise had been complete, the success of the operation was absolute, and the VDV had been right at the heart of it.

ROTORS, NOT SILK

The armoured expansion of the VDV would continue into the 1970s and early 1980s, with the addition of vehicles such as the BTR-D armoured personnel carrier and weapon systems such as the self-propelled 120mm 2S9 *Nona* howitzer/mortar, all supported by increasing airlift capability in the shape of heavy-lift transport aircraft such as the Ilyushin Il-76, but it was a parallel development that would have the most impact on airborne operations in the coming years – rotary-wing aircraft: helicopters. The development of heliborne forces occurred at a time when there was an acknowledgement within the Soviet hierarchy that, although the conduct of 'deep' operations on a nuclear battlefield was still a possibility, conventional warfare should not be ignored. Existing airborne doctrine was able to accommodate most of the differences inherent in fighting a conventional

ABOVE RIGHT
A unit of paratroopers on parade in Prague, September 1968. They are armed with AKS-47/AKMS assault rifles and RPK light machine guns, and are dressed in their jump overalls with insignia and badges on display, as well as their berets. The cornflower-blue beret was officially instituted by the Soviet Ministry of Defence Order 191 on 26 July 1969, though berets (initially coloured red then at some stage changing to blue) were certainly already being worn by the VDV, as demonstrated by this picture. Some personnel already seem to have adopted the beret flash (here worn on the right-hand side instead of the left that would become the norm); the main insignia looks like a simple red star badge similar to that worn on the *pilotka* cap rather than the more elaborate 'wreathed star', though there is documentary evidence of those too being worn during the occupation of Czechoslovakia. (© Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS/ Corbis via Getty Images)

ABOVE LEFT
A *desantnik* rises with his weapon at the ready immediately after landing during an exercise, 1970. With his white camouflage smock over his fur-lined jacket and heavily padded flight helmet, he is well set for service in the more inhospitable reaches of the Soviet Union. Exercises conducted from the 1930s onward ensured that lightly armed and -equipped paratroopers could not just survive but function in adverse weather conditions and harsh environments. (Sputnik/TopFoto)

ABOVE RIGHT
Desantniki practise an assault just after landing during an exercise, 1974. They all wear the relatively new 1969-pattern uniform with blue shoulder straps and berets. With the advent of significant helicopter-borne operations as well as the creation of air-assault brigades (*Desantno-shturmovyye brigady*), the VDV would become a more flexible and far more capable organization. (TASS via Getty Images)

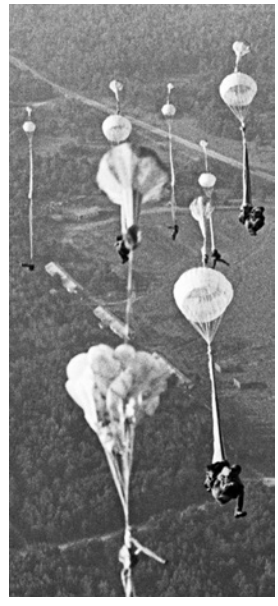
war (with the ongoing increase in the VDV's mechanized offensive capability feeding directly into such requirements), but the operational and tactical survivability of an airborne force in a more densely defended conventional battlespace (especially one with increasingly accurate and deadly missile and radar-directed gun systems) was a significant concern. The increased use of helicopters in the airlift mix came to be seen as a way of reducing the vulnerability of parachute- or air-landed troops, as well as expanding the scope of airborne operations. Such observations gathered pace through the 1960s and early 1970s but took time to come to fruition, not least because of the relatively slow development of machines capable enough to realize such a vision.

The innovative atmosphere of the 1930s had led to basic experiments with autogyros as well as some limited development of helicopter technology during the Great Patriotic War, but it was not until production began of Mikhail L. Mil's Mi-1 in 1951 that a genuinely useful helicopter entered Soviet service, even if it was capable of carrying only a few passengers. By 1954 the Mil Mi-4, a true transport helicopter, had made its debut; it could carry 16 soldiers or a cargo of 1,600kg that could be unloaded through clamshell doors at the rear of the fuselage. The new helicopters were labour-intensive to maintain and operate, but reliability gradually improved and the numbers coming off the production lines slowly increased. The utility of the Mi-4 in transporting troops was clear, either in support of rapid ground advances or in special tactical operations (usually company-strength forces operating less than 50km from the front), but the relative scarcity of the machines in the early years hindered a wider appreciation of their potential.

Despite such shortcomings, it was understood that another significant advantage of heliborne operations was the fact that, as far as the troops being transported were concerned, little special training was needed. In July

1966, an article by K. Andrukhov and V. Bulatnikov on 'The Growing Role of Air-Borne Troops in Modern Military Operations' published in the journal *Voennaya Mysl'* ('Military Thought') noted how 'The creation of the helicopter has increased the possibilities for landing airlifted troops from the personnel of regular ground troops which have not been trained in airborne landing. And this, in turn, has helped to resolve certain serious problems. While in the parachute method of landing, the troops were greatly dispersed after their landing and their combat efficiency remained low for a certain period of time, the troops delivered to the landing region in helicopters are ready to enter battle immediately' (quoted in Glantz 1984: 150). By the early 1960s, company- and battalion-level helicopter insertions of standard rifle infantry (as opposed to paratroopers) had become a feature of military exercises, though such operations were always tactical in nature, engaging in relatively shallow penetrations – anything much over 50km fell into the operational and strategic sphere and was the responsibility of the VDV.

The American use of helicopters, first in Korea and then especially in Vietnam, was closely observed by the Soviets. The war hero and military theorist Marshal Vasily D. Sokolovsky had noted the acceptance of helicopters in delivering infantry in smaller tactical missions, observing in 1968 that such a role could expand into the exploitation of a nuclear battlefield, where 'wide use will be made of tactical and operational airborne landings [including] capture of the regions where nuclear weapons are located, important objectives, river crossings, bridgeheads, mountain passes, defiles and the annihilation of strategic objectives which cannot be put out of commission in any other way. Helicopters will be used as the main means of dropping tactical airborne troops. Transport planes can be used for operational landings' (quoted in Glantz 1984: 146–47). That approach would work equally well in conventional engagements, and such observations contributed to the evolution of Soviet helicopter doctrine at a time when newer, more powerful machines were becoming available.



The parachutes of a troop of *desantniki* begin to bloom into life after they have jumped from an aircraft during a training mission in 1974. After the Great Patriotic War a new 'D-series' of parachutes was developed starting with the D-1 in 1955; by the early 1970s the D-5 Series 2 was in use as the main parachute for paratroopers, remaining in service until the end of the 1980s. The D-5 weighed 13.8kg and allowed jumps to be made from 8,000m at airspeeds of 40–400km/h, usually with a Z-2 or Z-5 reserve parachute also being worn, as well as safety tools such as the PPK-U-240B (*Poluavtomat Parashyutnyy Kombinirovannyy Unifitsirovannyy*, 'Semi-automatic Parachute Combined Unified' device) which could be set to open the parachute at a predetermined altitude if the static line failed or the parachutist was unable to operate the manual ripcord. (TASS via Getty Images)

A column of paratroopers file on to an An-12 transport aircraft for a practice jump, 1974. The An-12 was gradually replaced by the Ilyushin Il-76 and the Antonov An-22. (TASS via Getty Images)

A *desantnik* gathers up his parachute during a training exercise as a BMD-1 approaches, 1974. The BMD (*Boyevaya Mashina Desanta*, 'Combat Vehicle of the Airborne') provided a step-change in capability for the VDV when it entered service in 1970, giving the airborne forces not only protection and mobility but also firepower in the form of the 73mm 2A28 *Grom* ('Thunder') smoothbore semi-automatic gun and a 7.62×54mmR PKT coaxial machine gun. The armour protection was adequate against small-arms fire, but would suffer against heavier calibre machine guns and any sort of anti-tank round. The 2A28 could fire 8–10rd/min, using OG-15V HE-Frag (1,300m range) or PG-15V HEAT (4,500m range) rounds, and was fed by an autoloader, reducing the burden on the vehicle's two-man crew. (TASS via Getty Images)

The Mil Mi-8 entered service in 1965 and would quickly become the workhorse of the helicopter fleet, supported by the more capacious Mil Mi-6 which had entered service two years earlier; the improved capabilities and reliability of these helicopters was important, but it was the large quantities in which they were produced that allowed Soviet heliborne doctrine to come to fruition.

Improved helicopter airlift led to the development of air-assault brigades, formations that would make the most of the flexibility that the helicopter offered. Though they were similar to the airborne divisions of the VDV

Paratroopers in a BTR-D taking part in a parade celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory in the Great Patriotic War, 9 May 1985. The BTR-D (*Bronetransportyor Desanta*, 'Armoured Transporter of the Airborne') was introduced in the early 1970s to deal with some of the problems inherent in the BMD-1, notably a lack of space for troops. By omitting the turret the BTR-D could accommodate an integral crew of three plus ten passengers, unlike the cramped 2/6 capacity of the BMD-1. The vehicle was equipped with a pair of bow-mounted 7.62×54mmR PKB machine guns, and also had the capability to carry pintle-mounted weapons on the top of the superstructure such as the 9K111 *Fagot* ('Bassoon') ATGM, the AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher and 7.62mm or 12.7mm machine guns. (TASS/TopFoto)

An ASU-85 self-propelled gun disembarks from an An-12, likely sometime in the 1970s or 1980s; the VDV insignia of twin aircraft flanking a parachute is clearly visible on the front of the vehicle's hull. A replacement for the ASU-57, the ASU-85 slowly entered service from 1961 onwards, finding particular favour with the airborne forces of several Warsaw Pact countries. Its compact size and relatively light weight of 15.5 tonnes made it air-transportable; it was reasonably armoured to protect against light enemy fire, and was armed with an 85mm D-70 (2A15) main gun, as well as a 7.62×54mmR PKT coaxial machine gun. Airborne divisions were allotted an assault-gun battalion (each with 180 men and 31 ASU-85s), and they found ready employment in Afghanistan in an infantry-support role. (US Government/Wikimedia/Public Domain)

(which was also operationally responsible for them), technically the air-assault brigades (*Desantno-shturmovyye brigady*) came under the purview of the Soviet Ground Forces, and were expected to conduct relatively large-scale helicopter operations to a depth of 70–100km. Two air-assault brigades were established in 1968 (the 11th and 13th), with another following in 1972 (the 21st). A further nine air-assault brigades (the 35th, 36th, 37th, 38th, 39th, 40th, 56th, 57th and 58th) were raised in a second wave in 1979, with each of the military districts being allotted a brigade; the cadres of several of the second-wave brigades were taken from existing airborne formations, including the 105th Guards Airborne Division, which was disbanded at the end of 1979 in part to provide men for the new units. A final third wave of four air-assault brigades (the 23rd, 83rd, 128th and 130th) was raised towards the end of 1986 though two of them (the 128th and 130th) were little more than paper formations with fewer than 20 personnel each.

Air-assault brigades were 2,800 men strong and consisted of three parachute battalions (530 men each, GAZ-66) and one air-landing battalion (490 men, BMD-1), an artillery battalion (three batteries, each with four 122mm D-20A howitzers), combat-support units (including

Paratroopers of the 100th Separate Reconnaissance Company of the 105th Guards Airborne Division led by Leytenant Leonid Khabarov reach the summit of a 4,664m height in the Alai-Pamir mountains on 2 August 1976 (that date being the birthday of the airborne forces, it was christened 'VDV Peak'). The men wear a mix of clothing, including the early-type two-piece *Gorka* oversuit, with the majority sporting the *panamka* hat that would become so popular in Afghanistan. Khabarov would go on to lead the 4th Guards Airborne Assault Battalion of the 56th Separate Guards Airborne Assault Brigade, which captured the Salang Pass on 25 December 1979 during the first hours of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. ("Soldiers of Russia" Cultural Centre/ Wikimedia/CC BY-SA 3.0)

reconnaissance and communications companies), logistical-support units, a mortar battery (six 120mm PM-38 mortars), an anti-tank guided-missile battery (9k111 *Fagot* ATGM) and an anti-aircraft missile and artillery battery (ZU-23-2, 9K32 *Strela-2* or 9K310 *Igla-1* MANPADS). The 1970s would also see the establishment of separate air-assault battalions (*otdel'nyye desantno-shturmovyye batal'ony*), parachute-trained units that were expected to deploy by helicopter and usually attached to individual armies, giving those forces an independent airborne capability; by the end of 1979, there were 21 such battalions spread throughout the Soviet military districts, including four attached to Soviet armies stationed in East Germany.

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MANOEUVRES, 1976

(1) RPKS-74 gunner, 105th Guards Airborne Division

A squad's RPKS-74 gunner takes a brief rest during yet another training exercise. He wears his cornflower-blue beret pushed far back on his head, something that would become the fashion in Afghanistan in memory of Starshiy Serzhant Nikolai P. Chepik, a combat-engineer of the 317th Guards Parachute Regiment who wore his own beret that way. During the battle of the Kunar Valley in February 1980 – the first major encounter between the VDV and the Mujahideen – Chepik was cut off and killed, his body found amid those of many of his opponents. His officer, lacking any eyewitnesses to the event, recorded Chepik's end in gallant terms and he was subsequently made a Hero of the Soviet Union, the first of the war. His RPKS-74 light machine gun (*Ruchnoy Pulemyot Kalashnikova Skladyvayushchimsya*, 'Kalashnikov's side-folding hand-held machine gun') was the updated 5.45×39mm version of the older RPKS, with both models having side-folding stocks for the versions issued to airborne and air-assault units. Like its predecessor it was essentially an AK-74 with a heavier barrel and bipod to allow for more sustained and accurate fire as the squad automatic weapon – such guns were different from dedicated light/universal machine guns in that they used the same intermediate cartridge as the squad's riflemen as opposed to a full-calibre rifle round such as 7.62×54mmR used by the PK, for example. One advantage of the shift to a smaller calibre meant that the RPK-74's magazine could now hold 45 rounds of 5.45×39mm as opposed to the older RPK's 40 rounds of 7.62×39mm, with no increase in size. The RPK-74, like the AK-74, utilized 'Bakelite'-style magazines from their inception. Actually made from a glass-reinforced polymer, these reddish-brown magazines had been developed in the mid-1960s and proved durable and reliable, so with the introduction of the new 5.45mm cartridge it made sense to adapt them to the new calibre right from the beginning.

(2) Paratrooper on manoeuvres, 105th Guards Airborne Division

A typical paratrooper during summer exercises, equipped with the venerable RD-54 backpack including the belt pouches, one for two F1 grenades and the other for two 30-round AK magazines (the pouches were often worn on the belt but detached from the backpack, thus allowing the paratrooper to remove his RD-54 without also taking off his belt). He is armed with the new AKS-74 assault rifle. The AK-74 series of weapons were an evolution more than a radical change, even though the new weapons were chambered for the smaller 5.45×39mm round. In the 74-series of weapons the new bullet proved to be more accurate and to have greater range, and the size reduction in the round meant that soldiers could carry 50 per cent more ammunition without adding any extra weight. Because they looked so similar to the AKM (and had an almost identical manual of arms), the AK-74 series of weapons had differently designed forestocks and buttstocks so that even on the darkest night any soldier could tell the difference between weapons chambered for the new 5.45×39mm round and those chambered for the older 7.62×39mm round (the new paratrooper weapons all had side-folding as opposed to under-folding stocks). The universal adoption of 'Bakelite'-style magazines was another tell-tale sign (other Warsaw Pact countries would make steel magazines in 5.45×39mm calibre; the Soviets did not), but the muzzle brake/flash-hider was one of the most distinctive changes. In testing conducted by the US Army in the 1980s, it was found that the muzzle device reduced climb and mitigated much of the 5.45×39mm cartridge's recoil (3.39 joules compared to the M16A1's 6.44 joules), making it significantly easier to handle than the American assault rifle.

(3) Paratrooper launching a *Strela-2M*

A *desantnik* from the 105th Guards Airborne Division takes careful aim with his 9K32 *Strela-2M* shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missile launcher. He is from his division's anti-aircraft battalion, though three-man *Strela* ('Arrow') teams could be found in the divisional and regimental headquarters, as well as artillery, assault-gun, engineer and reconnaissance units. As a MANPAD ('man-portable air defence') system the *Strela-2M* was the last layer in the Soviet network of tiered air defences that included dedicated long-range high-altitude anti-aircraft batteries and the much-feared ZSU-23-4 *Shilka* self-propelled, radar-guided anti-aircraft gun. The *Strela-2* was inspired by the American FIM-43 'Redeye' man-portable surface-to-air missile system and also used infra-red seeking to acquire and track its targets, though it had a limited range of only 3,700m with a maximum altitude of 1,500m. The *Strela-2* had several deficiencies, including a poor hit probability and a low-yield warhead (1.15kg) that often left its targets damaged but still able to fly. It was succeeded by the 9K34 *Strela-3*, which extended the range to 4,500m and the altitude to 3,000m, and which used much-improved infra-red homing to deliver a larger and more effective warhead.

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An 82mm 2B14 *Podnos* ('waiter') mortar that entered service in 1983. Designed to be operated by airborne units, the 2B14 was a lightweight weapon that used the same ammunition as the 82mm 2B9 *Vasilek* ('Cornflower') mortar, and could be broken down into three sections for manhandling (16.2kg barrel, 17kg base plate and 13.9kg bipod), though it was usually transported by a variant of the GAZ-66 utility vehicle. The 2B14's four-man crew could fire its 3.14kg HE shell at an average of 15rd/min (22rd/min if uncorrected) from a minimum range of 85m out to a maximum range of 3,922m. (James Robert Nockson/ Wikimedia/CC BY-SA 3.0)

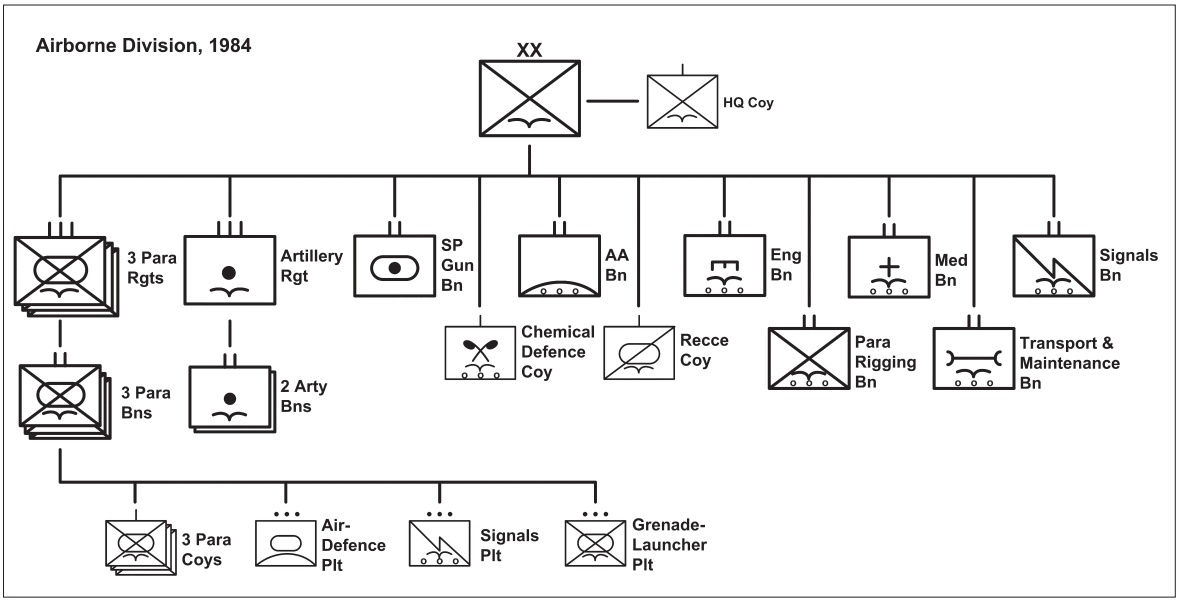
THE VDV IN AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan has been described as a state rather than a nation (Roy 1990: 12), something that helps to illuminate the reasons why its own government, and subsequently the puppet regime installed by Moscow, failed to impose their will upon its people. The Politburo's decision to intervene, a mix of wanting to end the fractious infighting that was destabilizing an allied socialist government, as well as to put a firm Soviet stamp on the region that would quell any possible ambitions of the revolutionary Iranians to the west or the US-backed Pakistanis to the east, was only ever meant to be a brief affair. Twice before, in Prague and Budapest, a rapid assault against key targets had yielded significant success, and the initial operation to restore order to Afghanistan was cast from much the same mould.

The operation – codenamed *Storm 333* – targeted the Afghan president Hafizullah Amin with air-landed contingents of the 103rd Guards Airborne Division tasked with capturing key government ministries in Kabul. To neutralize Amin himself, protected by 2,500 men at the Taj Bek Palace on the outskirts of the capital, a pair of special-forces groups, Grom and Zenit, supported by a company of paratroopers from the 345th Separate Guards Parachute Regiment (*otdel'nyy gvardeyskiy parashyutno-desantnyy polk*) and a company from the 154th Separate Spetsnaz Battalion (known as the Muslim Battalion due to it being composed of ethnic central Asians who could speak the local languages) were assembled. The operation got under way on 27 December 1979 and within a few hours had proved to be every bit as successful as the previous Czechoslovak and Hungarian interventions.

Unfortunately, the situation that confronted the Soviets after their takeover proved to be much more parlous than anticipated. While the newly established Afghan puppet government was able to exercise a degree of control in major urban centres such as Kabul, Gardez and Kandahar, the situation in the rural areas was an entirely different affair, with large swathes of the country effectively independent from all central control. The Afghan Army, the main government tool for pacifying the regions, was falling apart; theoretically ten divisions strong and armed with decent Soviet-supplied vehicles and equipment, the reality was a force reduced to 25,000 through rampant desertion (including examples of entire units defecting en masse to the Mujahideen), which was mostly commanded by men of suspect loyalty whose skills were often more political than they were military. It quickly became clear that the brunt of security operations would need to be led, at least in the short term, by Soviet forces, a task allotted to the 40th Army.

Soviet troops would operate under the umbrella of OKSVA (*Ogranichenny Kontingent Sovietskikh Voisk v Afganistane*, 'The Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan') and be attached to the 40th Combined-Arms Army (*obshchevoyskovaya armiya*), usually just known as the 40th Army. The bulk of the 40th Army's troops were motor-rifle units (the 5th Guards, 108th and 201st Motor-Rifle divisions) which were engaged in defending urban centres and keeping the road network open, but it also had a significant contingent of airborne troops that were operationally subordinate to the 40th Army but not technically part of its order of battle. The main airborne formation in Afghanistan was the 103rd Guards Airborne Division, stationed at Kabul Airport; of its three regiments, the 317th Guards Parachute Assault Regiment (*gvardeyskiy parashyutno-desantnyy polk*) and



A Soviet airborne division of the early to mid-1980s consisted of 6,554 men. It fielded three 1,473-strong mechanized parachute regiments, each with three battalions; each 316-strong battalion had three BMD-equipped parachute companies plus an air-defence platoon (nine 9K32 *Strela-2/3* or 9K310 *Igla-1* MANPADS), a signals platoon and a grenade-launcher platoon (six 30×29mm AGS-17s). The artillery regiment (620 men) had a howitzer battalion (240 men, 18 122mm D-30 towed guns) and a composite artillery battalion (240 men, 12 122mm D-30 towed guns and six 122mm BM-21V *Grad* rocket launchers). The 180-man assault-gun battalion fielded 31 self-propelled 85mm ASU-85s; the 155-man anti-aircraft battalion had 12 9K32 *Strela-2* and 9K34 *Strela-3* MANPADS and 18 23mm ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft guns.

the 350th were stationed at Kabul Airport for the duration of the war, while the 357th was located in the Bala Hissar fortress during 1980–86, and then at Kabul Airport thereafter. The 56th Separate Guards Air Assault Brigade (*otdel'naya gvardeyskaya desantno-shturmovaya brigada*) was stationed in Kunduz, while the 345th Separate Guards Parachute Assault Regiment was at Bagram.

Spetsnaz formations were closely allied to the VDV and would often operate in conjunction with the reconnaissance units of parachute regiments, playing an increasingly important role in the conflict as it progressed. The main Spetsnaz units were: the 264th Independent Special Forces Regiment, which specialized in radio and radio-technical intelligence (Kabul); the 15th Special Forces Brigade, operating out of Jalalabad; and the 22nd Special Forces Brigade, operating out of Asadabad. Airlift and close air support for all airborne units was well-supplied; the 40th Army was unusual in having its own integral air force, which grew to consist of two combat air regiments, one combat squadron, a mixed air regiment, three independent helicopter regiments, a helicopter detachment and three independent helicopter squadrons, for a total of 60 combat aircraft, 19 transport aircraft and 253 helicopters. The Soviet aviation units shared their bases in Kabul, Shindand, Bagram and Kandahar with Afghan Air Force units which could also be called upon in times of need, and further support was available in the form of long-range bombers operating from bases in the Soviet Union (Braithwaite 2011: 343).

The first major operation undertaken by OKSVA was an attempt to clear the Kunar Valley of insurgents on 29 February 1980. The target was selected in large part because it was so close to Kabul, and while some resistance was expected, the reality that developed on the ground was sobering. The operation called for the insertion of an airborne battalion (3rd Battalion, 317th Guards Parachute Assault Regiment, hereafter 3/317) above the village of Shigal deep in the Kunar Valley while a combined force of mechanized vehicles and another airborne battalion (3/350) pushed up the road, pinning the rebels between the two forces. The attack was something of a disaster;

A section of paratroopers board an Mi-8 helicopter after an operation in Nangarhar Province, late 1980s. The Mi-8 was hardy and versatile but was lightly armoured and could carry only half its notional 24-passenger load at high altitude. A transport helicopter regiment (usually attached to an airborne division or an air -assault brigade) would have 24 Mi-6/Mi-26 heavy-lift helicopters and 32 Mi-8 medium-lift helicopters. (TASS via Getty Images)

after the helicopter insertion of 3/317, the battalion found itself in confusing terrain and under fire from all sides, while the mechanized column had its

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PANJSHIR V OFFENSIVE, 1982

On 18 May 1982, an assault force from the 345th Separate Guards Parachute Regiment was inserted by helicopter on the heights above the fortified Afghan town of Khanez in the Panjshir Valley. The operation to wrest control of the strategically located valley from Ahmad Shah Massoud had been initiated with a diversionary attack on 15 May, an action followed up with a massive artillery bombardment and armoured assault on the valley's entrance while airborne and air-assault troops conducted near-simultaneous landings all along the length of the Panjshir Valley. There had been four previous attempts (Operations *Panjshir I–IV*) to clear the Mujahideen from the valley, but all had failed. This assault was by far the largest, the attacking force consisting of over 12,000 men including some of the best troops available, from Afghan commandos to the 103rd Guards Airborne Division and the 345th Separate Guards Parachute Regiment. The role of the airborne troops was to secure the heights as well as to block Mujahideen attempts to escape the slow-moving armoured hammer that was moving across the valley floor.

A sharpshooter (**1**) moves to find cover where he can set up a decent firing position for his 7.62×54mmR SVD-63 (*Samoza-Ryadnaya Snayperskaya Vintovka Dragunova*, 'Dragunov's semiautomatic sniper rifle'). Despite looking like an AK-variant as well as using some elements of the AK/AKM design, the Dragunov did not share parts interchangeability with any of Kalashnikov's weapons. The Soviet Army had been looking for a reliable and accurate semi-automatic marksman's rifle since the early 1940s, and with the Dragunov its goals were met. An M91/30 bolt-action rifle could manage five aimed shots per minute, the Dragunov 25–30; using a standard PSO-1 'scope (a 4× sight that was specifically designed for the Dragunov) a skilled marksman could achieve hits out to as far as 800m, though 400–600m was more usual in field conditions. As the Soviet–Afghan War progressed, it became clear that it was extremely useful to have a weapon which used a full-power rifle cartridge that was capable of reaching beyond the ranges at which most assault rifles were employed, and so Dragunovs were issued in ever-greater numbers. The role that the Dragunov-armed soldier filled was not the same as a true sniper in the Western sense of the term, but rather that of a 'designated marksman', a valuable asset in the challenging Afghan terrain.

Like the sharpshooter, the *starshina* (**2**) wears the new two-piece airborne field uniform – here worn without rank markings or insignia – which was issued soon after the beginning of the Soviet–Afghan War (1980 or 1981) and which in consequence came be known as the *Afghanka*. His most notable piece of equipment is his *lifchik* (literally 'brassiere'), usually known as a chest rig. 'Chicom' three-cell versions were common among the Mujahideen and it didn't take the Soviet troops long to recognize the utility of such a design. During the first years of the war most were manufactured within the barracks, with early popular examples being copies of the 'Chicom' style or a four- or six-cell version created by sewing together pairs of RD-54 magazine pouches (as shown here). He also wears a simple canvas grenade belt to hold the shells for his GP-25; later in the war, the *lifchik* would be professionally produced, one of the more common types being the *Poyas-A* ('Belt-A', a clone of the 'Chicom'-pattern vest) and the *Poyas-B* (a belt for VOG-25 grenades) that could be worn separately or as a combined rig. He carries an AKS-74 assault rifle with a tourniquet wrapped around its stock and a GP-25 *Kostyor* ('Bonfire') under-barrel grenade launcher (sometimes also referred to by its initial production designation of BG-15), a Soviet version of the US M203. Like its American cousin it used 40mm shells, though of a rather different design and incompatible with the AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher which used 30mm shells. The minimum range was 100m, with a theoretical maximum of 400m.

The *desantnik* (**3**) is wearing the *Mabuta* battledress (originally developed in the 1970s and named for the dictator of Zaire Mobutu Sese Seko, after the style of uniforms that were worn there by Soviet military advisors). Previous uniform changes in 1955, 1965 and 1969 had not addressed the fact that Soviet field uniforms were usually uncomfortable and not fit for the rigours of the modern battlefield. The old *panamka* hat, first issued to troops in hot climates in 1937, was reintroduced at the same time as the *Afghanka*, as was a new style of field cap that the *starshina* is wearing. He carries an RPKS-74 light machine gun and to make more room for ammunition he has removed his RD-54 backpack's front pouches and replaced both of them with RPK ammunition pouches, each of which holds four 45-round magazines.

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Paratroopers lay an ambush in Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan. The soldier to the left is using his RPKS-74 light machine gun's bipod to give him a more stable platform from which to engage the enemy, while his comrade has a 40mm GP-25 *Kostyor* ('Bonfire') grenade launcher attached to his AKS-74 assault rifle. (TASS via Getty Images)

way blocked by a blown road. The paratroopers of 3/350 were forced to dismount from their vehicles and march to the aid of their comrades fighting at Shigal, finally forcing the Mujahideen to retreat; the 350 men of 3/317 had lost 38 dead and 26 wounded. The following month, an entire motor-rifle battalion was destroyed in an ambush in Paktia. It quickly became clear that serious changes were needed.

Unsuitable vehicles were sent back to the Soviet Union, while those that were kept like the BMD (*Boyevaya Mashina Desanta*, 'Combat Vehicle of the Airborne') had their anti-tank missiles removed and AGS-17 *Plamya* ('Flame') automatic grenade launchers fitted in their place. Special training regimes were instituted for small groups of paratroopers who were schooled in reconnaissance and diversionary tactics, one of their instructors noting that this form of warfare demanded an emphasis on high mobility, speed, security and effectiveness (Schofield 1993: 64). Artillery support, one of the

Men from the 5th Company, 350th Guards Parachute Regiment prepare to leave on a mission, *c*.1984–85. The clothing and equipment are typically varied, with several men sporting RD-54 backpacks, one wearing a type of chest rig, and at least two with flak vests (likely the 6B-2 model, which was developed in 1979 and widely issued from 1981 and throughout the Soviet–Afghan War – it was good enough to stop shrapnel and pistol rounds, but a 7.62×39mm round would punch right through it). (Sergey Novikov/ Wikimedia/CC BY 3.0)

key factors in any Soviet Army operation, was hampered by the unsuitability of some weapon systems when employed in the rough terrain where much of the fighting took place, and when it was effective the Mujahideen either abandoned the fight and melted away, or pressed in as close to the Soviets as they could, forcing the gunners to lift their fire for fear of hitting their own men. The nature of the fighting demanded new tactics at the lowest level, but also revised operational planning and a new approach to combat leadership at all levels. Unsurprisingly, such changes were slow to come, sometimes only developing in part or for a period of time within a given unit, dependent as they were on the capabilities and initiative of the men who were tasked with employing them.

The VDV regiments, due to their flexibility and higher level of training, were often called upon to conduct ambushes, search missions and assaults, some of the most significant assaults being the multiple offensives launched against the Panjshir Valley between 1980 and 1985. The Panjshir was the fiefdom of one of the insurgency's most capable commanders, Ahmad Shah Massoud, who took full advantage of his strategic position only 70km north of Kabul to threaten attacks on the capital as well as the air base at Bagram and the Salang Pass, through both of which much of the 40th Army's supplies flowed. The first offensive was in April 1980 in response to a damaging attack on Bagram airfield, and it proved to be a dress rehearsal for much of what followed: after a thunderous pounding by artillery and aviation assets, mechanized forces assaulted up the valley floor while airborne elements (in this case from the 56th Separate Guards Air Assault Brigade) made helicopter insertions to cut off retreating rebels or to attack them from unexpected directions. Despite losses, the initial results were good, but they only lasted for as long as the Soviet/Afghan forces remained, with the Mujahideen flowing back in as soon as the helicopters and BMPs (*Boyevaya Mashina Pekhoty*, 'infantry fighting vehicle') had left. Two further operations were launched that year, in November and December, with much the same result.

Even the largest and most significant of the Panjshir operations, *Panjshir V* – conducted over six days in May 1982 and involving over 12,000 Soviet

BELOW LEFT
An Mi-24D gunship files overhead during the dying days of the Soviet–Afghan War, February 1989. Much-feared by the Mujahideen, who nicknamed it the 'Devil's Chariot', the Mi-24D was fitted with armour that meant it more or less had the run of the skies until the gradual appearance of the FIM-92 'Stinger' surface-to-air missile towards the end of 1986. (Eric BOUVET/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

BELOW RIGHT
A radio-equipped paratrooper watches a military parade in Kabul, 1988. He wears the older-style one-piece KLMK overalls, but here adorned with a number of badges, cornflower-blue shoulder straps, and the VDV patch on his sleeve. Though it was common both during and after the Great Patriotic War for soldiers to wear their decorations and insignia in the field, in Afghanistan it was not usually the case, though there were examples of soldiers sewing the VDV sleeve patch onto their jump overalls or, as in this case, their camouflage suits. (Patrick ROBERT/Sygma via Getty Images)

RIGHT
With its radar dome removed, the ZSU-23-4 (*Zenitnaya Samokhodnaya Ustanovka*, 'Self-propelled Anti-aircraft System') *Shilka* saw use as a devastating anti-personnel weapon. (Anton Novoderezhkin/TASS via Getty Images)

FAR RIGHT
A Mil Mi-8MT helicopter armed with four UV-16 rocket pods (a total of 64 S-5 rockets) lifts off after having dropped a patrol from the 5th Company of the 350th Guards Parachute Regiment in the mountains of Afghanistan, 1984–85. (Sergey Novikov/Wikimedia/CC BY 3.0)

and Afghan troops including the 103rd Guards Airborne Division and the 345th Separate Guards Parachute Assault Regiment – ended in much the same way. Four more operations (*Panjshir VI–IX*) were launched in the

G

AFGHANISTAN, 1985

(1) NSV gunner, 56th Separate Guards Airborne Assault Brigade

This rather relaxed NSV gunner has endured the discomfort and boredom that was par for the course among those serving in outposts, either ad hoc or permanent. Things could change very quickly, however, and on such occasions the NSV could be a vital part of the defence, such as during the battle at Hill 3234 on 7–8 January 1988. The NSV (named for its inventors, Nikitin, Sokolov and Volkov) is a 12.7×108mm belt-fed heavy machine gun that became the successor to the DShK after its adoption into Soviet service in 1971. Also known as the *Utyos* ('Rock'), it is a full-automatic-only weapon with a relatively high rate of fire of 700–800rd/min; its effective range is 800m against vehicles and more generally 1,500m, though it can reach 2,000m with reduced accuracy. Weighing 25kg on its own, the 6T7 tripod adds 16kg while the 50-round ammunition belt contributes another 11kg for a total of 52kg. The tripod can be adapted to a number of different firing positions which made it useful when setting up gun bunkers in the rugged and varied terrain of the Afghan mountains. Long-range target acquisition is aided by the use of the SPP (*Snaiperskii Pritsel Pulemyotnii*, 'Machine Gun Sniper Scope'), one of a number of sights that can be fitted to the NSV. The gunner is comfortable enough in his dirty jump overalls and his *panamka* hat, which he wears with the brims folded up in the 'cowboy' style that proved particularly popular among paratroopers and other reconnaissance troops.

(2) *Razvedchik*, 80th Separate Guards Intelligence Company

The *razvedchik* is from the 80th Separate Guards Intelligence Company (part of the 103rd Guards Airborne Division), and is well-used to helicopter insertions and long-range patrols through enemy-held mountains. He wears the two-piece KLMK (*kamuflirovannyi letnyi maskirovochnyi komplekt*, 'summer camouflage deceptive set') suit. First issued in 1975, the new version of the *komplekt* was made from lightweight cotton and cut more like a uniform; indeed it could be worn as such, rather than being suitable only as an overgarment. In addition to a reworking of the 'stair-step' camouflage pattern, the new suits added more scrim tabs to the suit, allowing the wearer to insert foliage and branches to increase his chances of remaining unseen. The suit also came with a detachable hood, a camouflage beret and a face mask. His 'Moskva' knock-off Adidas tennis shoes were a common sight among reconnaissance and special-forces groups, who valued the comfort and flexibility such footwear gave over Army boots. His *lifchik* is a locally made copy of the common 'Chicom' pattern, allowing room for three magazines as well as a few other sundries. He is equipped with an R-392 radio which consisted of a headset (a single earpiece and cheek microphone) and a portable transceiver with a flexible Kulikov antenna, good for a range of 10km. He carries an AKS-74UB (*Ukorochenniy Besshumniy*, 'shortened, silent') carbine, a much-shortened and sound-suppressed version of the AK-74 assault rifle that still fired the same 5.45×39mm cartridge, though with a 20-round magazine (the standard AKS-74U used the usual 30-round magazines). The 'B' designation marks this gun out as one adapted to take the PBS-3 suppressor (*Pribor Besshumnoy Strel'by* – 'Silent Shooting Device'); the silencer lowered the report of gunshots to 130–135dB, which in addition to its compact size made it a popular weapon among Spetsnaz operators and reconnaissance troops.

(3) *Desantnik* engineer, 345th Sepearate Guards Parachute Regiment

The engineer is taking part in a search-and-destroy mission in the mountains, and has just engaged an enemy strongpoint. Rather cockily he wears his cornflower-blue beret, though without the red flash which was usually omitted in the field. His clothes are 1981-issued woodland-pattern summer camouflage, also known as TTsKO (*tritsvetnaia kamuflirovannaia odezhda*, 'three-colour camouflage uniform'). His weapon is the fearsome RPO-Rys (*reaktivnyy pekhotnyy ognemot 'Rys'*, 'rocket infantry flamethrower "Lynx"'). It is a two-part device, the launcher (which is retained) and the rocket, which is in a self-contained tube that locks into the back of the launcher and which is discarded after firing. The RPO-Rys has an effective range of around 190m (out to a maximum of 400m), and its 4kg warhead (containing 4 litres of napalm) creates a cone of flame upon detonation, 4m wide at its base and up to 30m long, that burns furiously for up to 2 minutes at 1,200°C.

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Personnel of a Soviet special-operations unit, likely made up of airborne reconnaissance troops and Spetsnaz operators, relax close to their barracks after the completion of a successful combat mission (the interception of a Mujahideen caravan smuggling in weapons from Pakistan) in May 1987. The battalion chief of operations sits on top of the BTR-70, an eight-wheeled armoured personnel carrier manned by a crew of three (with room for seven passengers), armed with a 14.5×114mm KPVT or 12.7×108mm DShK heavy machine gun, as well as a 7.62×54mmR PKT coaxial machine gun as its secondary armament. The BTR-70 was supposed to replace the BTR-60 class of APCs as one of the main workhorses of armoured infantry operations, but the fact that it was awkward to enter or exit quickly, especially when its petrol engines caught fire during combat, meant that it was never popular or made in large numbers, quickly being replaced by the BTR-80. (E. Kuvakin/Wikimedia/CC BY-SA 3.0)

succeeding three years in between ceasefires, the last of them taking place on 16 June 1985. None achieved anything more than temporary relief, however, in large part because although tactical victories could be expected, it was impossible to convert them into larger operational goals due to a lack of resources and incoherent long-term operational planning.

Despite their size and complexity, the Panjshir offensives were the exception rather than the rule. Most paratrooper operations were conducted at battalion or company level and might involve patrols or deep raids in armoured vehicles, airborne insertions along the Afghan–Pakistani border to set up ambushes for Mujahideen arms caravans, helicopter-dropped long-range reconnaissance patrols conducted on foot through the mountains and a variety of counter-insurgency operations. In the case of counter-insurgency operations, airborne elements often found themselves inserted in the path of the enemy's expected escape route while other elements (often drawn from motor-rifle divisions) drove the Mujahideen fighters into the trap, with varying degrees of success. The outcome of such relatively small-scale encounters relied heavily on clear leadership, operational security, the coordination and skill of the respective units involved, good intelligence as to the disposition and strength of the enemy, and the ability to adapt in response to evolving circumstances on the ground.

The last significant operation of the war was codenamed *Magistral* ('Highway'), and was an attempt by General-leytenant Boris V. Gromov, the 40th Army commander, to reopen the Kabul–Gardez–Khost road that had been under Mujahideen control since 1981. It was ultimately more of a political operation than anything; OKSVA had been drawing down troop levels in earnest since the beginning of 1987, and as a sop to the current Afghan president, Mohammad Najibullah, a bold operation to relieve the siege of Khost would provide him with a strategic victory and bolster his authority as active Soviet military support was draining away.

It would be the largest undertaking of the whole conflict and would call on units from the 103rd Guards Airborne Division, the 56th Separate Guards Air Assault Brigade and the 345th Separate Guards Parachute Assault Regiment, as well as a number of Soviet and Afghan motorized regiments. The Gardez–Khost road snaked into a virtually impenetrable mountainous region held by the Mujahideen, the only way through being the Satukandav Pass, the key objective of the operation. The initial phase of Operation *Magistral* started on 19 November 1987 and cleared the approaches to Gardez, allowing the main assault force to stage there from 21 November, stockpiling ammunition and supplies while conducting reconnaissance missions against the enemy's positions. The attack on the pass itself began on 28 November, the most colourful aspect of it being a drop of 20 dummy paratroopers that enticed the Mujahideen anti-aircraft positions to give themselves away, after which they were pounded by artillery and air strikes for four hours.

The next day, a brief bombardment was followed by the advance of a dismounted motor-rifle regiment across the foothills in an attempt to seize the high ground above the pass, but it became bogged down and suffered numerous casualties under heavy counter-attacks. Gromov reformulated his attack, this time with a battalion each of paratroopers from the 103rd Guards Airborne Division and Afghan Army commandos being given the job of taking the high ground. The new assault against the heights was conducted on 1 December and carried the day, with initial successes followed up by an ambitious and aggressive VDV battalion commander who pushed on into the pass itself, causing the enemy to withdraw (Grau 2001: 60–65). Hard fighting would continue for the remainder of the month as the airborne and motor-rifle troops cleared the mountains of guerrillas, finally opening the road on 29 December for the first time since 1981. With the roadway

FAR LEFT
A young *desantnik* prepares to leave Afghanistan, 13 February 1989. The broad horizontal red stripe on his shoulder strap identifies him as a *starshiy serzhant* ('senior sergeant'). The medals and awards on his right breast (clockwise from top left) include an Army proficient serviceman badge, a Guards division badge, a 1968-pattern jump-qualification badge with pennant, and a warrior athlete badge first class; his lapel pin is a badge celebrating the anniversary of the October Revolution (7–8 November 1917). The awards worn on his left breast (left to right) include: the medal for valour; a medal celebrating 70 years of the armed forces of the Soviet Union; a medal 'For the Tenth Year of the Saur Revolution'; and the 'Medal from the Grateful Afghan People'. The pin below the medals is a variant on a Komsomol badge. (Patrick ROBERT/Sygma via Getty Images)

LEFT
A pair of suitably relieved paratroopers wave goodbye from the door of their troop transport before take-off at Kabul Airport during the final stages of the Soviet Army's phased withdrawal from Afghanistan, 13 February 1989. (DOUGLAS CURRAN/AFP/Getty Images)

now clear, the Soviet forces handed the position over to the Afghans and withdrew, with inevitable consequences: the Gardez–Khost road remained open for only 12 days.

The VDV's experience in Afghanistan was bruising. While only around 10 per cent of motor-rifle, armour, aviation and artillery officers served in the war, most of the airborne, air-assault and Spetsnaz officers did (Grau 2001: xix). The capabilities of the airborne contingent coupled with their elite status meant that they were pressed into use with far more frequency, and in far more challenging situations, than other types of units, and they often suffered commensurately. Of all the forces that served through the war, they proved themselves to be the most adaptable, the most willing to learn hard lessons and the most consistent in the application of those lessons.

H

KUNAR MOUNTAINS, SEPTEMBER 1988

A platoon of paratroopers from the 357th Guards Parachute Regiment have been tasked with setting up ambushes along one of the treacherous tracks that run through the high mountains from Pakistan into Kunar Province, Afghanistan. A small scouting patrol precedes the main body, and are easing their way into position overlooking one of the Mujahideen's potential routes through the heights. The day has several hours left before darkness comes, and with it the chance of an enemy caravan.

The leader of this small patrol (**1**) is a *mladshiy serzhant* ('junior sergeant'). He wears a two-piece *Gorka* oversuit; first developed in the 1970s, these durable garments were made from tent canvas and were designed for infantry operating in the mountains, and proved very popular in the more unforgiving regions of Afghanistan where the VDV and Spetsnaz spent so much of their time. (The term *Gorka* may be related to one of the Russian words for 'hill', but the etymology is far from certain.) He carries his ammunition, grenades and flares in a second-pattern *Poyas-A lifchik* of the sort that was manufactured in the latter part of the Soviet–Afghan War, when such items had moved on from being the products of an ad hoc cottage industry turned out by the troops themselves. It is identifiable by its layout of three magazine cells flanked by two grenade pouches on each side (one above the other) and loops for signal flares. He carries an R-148 *Malysh* ('Kid') radio transceiver, in a belt pouch; designed for communications at platoon level, the R-148 was adopted by Soviet Army in 1971 and operated on a frequency range of 37.0–51.95MHz with channel spacing at 50KHz. It had a maximum range of 6km, though such distances were often optimistic in the high mountains and great care had to be taken to ensure that communications were reliable. Weighing 3kg, the belt pouch contains the battery, transceiver, control toggle, headset (the same model as the R-392), and a 1.5m-long Kulikov whip antenna. He is armed with an RPG-18 *Mukha* ('Fly') disposable light anti-tank rocket launcher in his pack and an AKS-74N1 assault rifle that mounts a 1PN34 night sight; developed in the early 1970s, the 2.2kg optic saw service throughout the Soviet–Afghan War despite being superseded by the 1PN58 in 1985.

The PKM gunner (**2**) wears a winter *Afghanka* jacket, though without its internal lining as the temperature is far from freezing. He carries a 7.62×54mmR PKM (*Pulemyot Kalashnikova Modernizirovany*, 'Kalashnikov's machine gun modernized'), an upgraded version of the PK general-purpose machine gun that entered service in 1969. There were few changes between the two weapons, though the PKM dispensed with the fluted barrel and changed the flash-hider. It was also somewhat lighter, but the more important changes were the efficiencies and refinements that were applied to the production process rather than in how the weapon performed – it was already an excellent machine gun. As a last-ditch effort he carries a 9×18mm Makarov semi-automatic pistol on his belt.

The final man in the team (**3**) is a 'rocketeer'. He wears a 6B-2 flak vest, lugs spare ammunition for the PKM and carries a pair of 'Bumblebees' on his back. The RPO-A *Shmel* (*Reaktivnyy Pekhotnyy Ognemot-A Shmel*, 'Rocket Infantry Flamethrower-A "Bumblebee"') was adopted by the Soviet Army in the mid- to late 1980s and first saw service with the Chemical Defence Company of the 103rd Guards Airborne Division in Afghanistan. It was an evolution of the RPO-Rys: instead of the two-part system of a reusable launcher and disposable rocket tubes, the RPO-A was a self-contained one-shot weapon in the same style as the RPG-18 and RPG-22 *Netto* ('Net'), but instead of an anti-armour role the RPO-A could launch a 2.1kg thermobaric payload out to 1,000m. On detonation, the initial fireball had a 6m radius, with a secondary impact zone of up to 50m, the intense heat and overpressure of the blast causing severe injuries to any personnel caught within range. There were two other launcher variants, the RPO-D (armed with a smoke-generating warhead) and the RPO-Z (an incendiary warhead filled with a napalm-like substance called Pyrogel). The manual of arms for both the -D and -Z launchers was virtually identical to that of the RPO-A, so the operator was required to undergo very little extra training to use all three variants. His personal defence weapon is an AKS-74U (*Ukorochenniy*, 'shortened') carbine. This compact version of the AKS-74 assault rifle first appeared in the late 1970s or early 1980s, and was often issued to airborne troops as well as vehicle and air crews because of the significant increase in firepower it gave them over their semi-automatic pistol-calibre Makarovs or Stechkins. Its compact nature found favour with more than a few *desantniki*, and it grew to have a large number of nicknames including *Okurok* ('cigarette stub'), *Suchok* ('small tree branch'), *Ksyukha* (a diminutive of the Russian female name *Ksenia*) and *Suka* ('bitch').

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CONCLUSION

The collapse of the Soviet Union, when it came on 25 December 1991, was rapid. Only years earlier, such a swift dissolution of what was unquestionably one of the world's two superpowers would have seemed absurd. The Soviet Army in particular, despite its failure in Afghanistan, was still a vast and enormously powerful tool of the state, with its airborne forces clearly among its most capable and dangerous strategic assets. The weakness of the Soviet system was internal, however; and the political, economic and moral rot that gradually ate away the heart of Soviet rule was embedded within the armed forces as well, with endemic problems across all branches of service including the VDV: poor tactical leadership; *dedovshchina* (the mistreatment of conscripts) and the culture of violence within most units; corruption; poor-quality equipment; supply shortages; haphazard training; short-term conscription; and the lack of a professional NCO class.

For the VDV, all these problems had been apparent in Afghanistan, and successful attempts had been made to remedy some of them, but it was not possible to undo decades of institutional damage while also fighting an intense and bitter war. The end of active combat also led to an unusually rapid loss of institutional memory and the skills that had been acquired at such great cost, the two-year term of enlistment ensuring that most of the recruits in the 1991 intakes would have very little contact with veterans of the war. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, independence movements arose throughout many of the Soviet Union's republics. The Politburo's more reactionary members attempted a *coup d'état* on 21 August 1991, but the tide was running against them, helped in part by a number of senior VDV officers who actively aided the sitting government in thwarting the plotters. The remaining months of the year saw a slow slide towards an end that was now inevitable.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, enormous political and ethnic tensions, long held in check by Moscow, would soon start to reveal themselves, most seriously in Chechnya. The wars that followed, scrappy and vicious affairs against irregular forces of highly motivated insurgents, would in some aspects be a modern echo of the earlier conflict in Afghanistan. In such circumstances, elite troops like those of the VDV were relied upon to press home the fight, helping to define their role in the Russian Army at a time when the sclerotic economy was forcing radical decisions about what forces the new state could afford simply to maintain, let alone develop.

It was fortunate for the VDV that its role, unlike that of the motorized and tank divisions, was not mostly dependent on the expectation of vast armoured battles playing out on in Central Europe. Despite its still-potent ability to deliver strategic hammer-blows in a modernized version of 'deep battle', the VDV was inherently adaptable, with its proficiency in air-assault tactics and the ability of its units to operate independently of a rigid command structure being just the sort of modern capabilities the Russian state needed as it fought to stabilize its fractious borders. The elite nature of the airborne units, their training and self-belief, not to mention their adaptability to the evolving nature of modern warfare, would ensure that they not only survived the transition from a communist state to a Russian one, but would come to thrive in an army that would increasingly recognize the value of their initiative and professionalism.

FAR LEFT
VDV recruits go through a rather dramatic obstacle course during training at the Ryazan Red Banner Higher Airborne Command School, September 1989. While leaping through fiery rings (and other feats such as breaking bricks with one's bare hands) tended to be more for display during graduation ceremonies than a serious feature of a paratrooper's education, such acts of physical hardiness and bravery did reflect the pride that many paratroopers had in themselves and their units. (Sputnik/ TopFoto)

LEFT
A paratrooper fires a GP-25 under-barrel grenade launcher mounted on his AKS-74 assault rifle during training in Gaiziunai, Lithuania, April 1991. He wears a modern variant of the woodland-pattern camouflage, but is still equipped with an RD-54 backpack and an entrenching tool that is the same design as those carried in the Great Patriotic War. (Alain Nogues/ Sygma/Sygma via Getty Images)

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INDEX

References to illustrations are shown in **bold**. Plates are shown with page locators in brackets.

Afghanistan, operations in 2, 5, 47, **47**, 48, 50–52, **52**, **F(53)**, 54–56, **54**, **55**, **56**, **G(57)**, 58–60, **58**, **59**, **H(61)**, 62
air-assault bdes 44, 46–48: 56th Guards Separate 47, 51, 55, 56, **G1(57)**, 59

airborne assault groups 34, **C2(35)**
airborne bdes 5, 6, 10, 18, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28: 1st–5th 18, 19, 20; 1st Guards 25, 26; 2nd Guards 25; 3rd Guards 25, 26, 27, 28, **B1(29)**; 4th Guards 25; 5th Guards 25, 26, 27, 28, **B2–3(29)**; 6th 20; 7th 20, 22; 8th 17, 20, 22; 9th 20, 22; 10th–12th 20; 13th 12, 14, 20; 14th–20th 20; 22nd 20; 23rd 20, 23; 24th 20; 25th 20; 47th 14; 201st 14, 15–16, 20, 21–22; 202nd 12, **A1–2(13)**, 14; 204th 14, 15–16, 20; 211th 14, 20, 23; 212th 14, 15, 20; 214th 14, 15, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22, 22
  composition/strength 14, 16–17, 18, 19
  expansion/rebuilding 14, 16–17, 21, 22
airborne corps 5, 17, 18–19, 22, 23, 24: 1st–3rd 17, 18–19, 20, 24; 4th 17–18, 18–19, 20, 22, 23, 24; 5th 17, 18–19, 20, 21, 24; 6th–10th 18, 19, 20, 24; 8th Guards 31, 32, 33; 15th Guards 31, 32, 33; 37th–39th Guards 20, 31, 32, 33
airborne dvns 12, 24, 28, 30, 31–32, 36, 37, 38, 46, 51: 1st–6th Guards 20, 30; 7th Guards 20, 30, 32, 33, 34, **C2(35)**, 36, 40, **D1–2(41)**, 42; 8th–9th Guards 20, 30; 10th Guards 30; 11th Guards 20, 25, 28, 32; 12th Guards 20, 25, 28; 13th Guards 25, 28, 30, 32; 14th–15th Guards 25, 28, 30; 16th Guards 20, 25, 28; 21st Guards 32; 31st Guards 32, 33, 34, **C3(35)**, 36, 37; 37th–39th Guards 30; 76th Guards 31, 32, 33, 38; 98th– 99th Guards 20, 31, 32, 33; 100th Guards 31, 32; 103rd Guards 31, 32, 33, 42, 43, 50, 52, 56, **G2(57)**, 59, 60; 104th Guards 31, 32, 33; 105th Guards 31, 32, 33, 47, **47**, 48, **E1–3(49)**; 106th–107th, 114th Guards 31, 32, 33
airborne/parachute regts **1**, 6, 12, 18, 19, 31, 32, 36, 38, 50, 51, 52, **F(53)**, 56, **G3(57)**, 59: 1st–2nd 12, 14; 3rd 12, **A3(13)**; 5th 14; 80th Guards 36, 37; 108th Guards 33, 34, **C2(35)**, 36, 37, 40, **D2–3(41)**; 114th Guards 37; 119th Guards 33; 317th Guards 48, 50–51, 53, 54; 337th Guards 34, **C1(35)**; 350th Guards 50–51, 53, 54, **54**, **56**; 357th Guards 51, 60, **H1–3(61)**; 381st Guards 34, **C3(35)**, 37
airborne troops (*desantniki*/VDV) 2, 4, 8–9, 10, 11, 14, 15–16, 17, 26, 30, 31, 33, 47, 59, 60
  establishment/origins 5, 8, 9, 18
  expansion/reorganization 6, 11, 12, 14, 24–25, 32–33, 43
  operational roles 4, 6, 11, 14, 15–16, 17–18, 19–20, 21, **23**, 24, 31, 32, 33, 37, 38
  training **4**, **5**, 6–7, **7**, **8–9**, **9**, 10–12, **11**, **12**, 14, 17, 18, 19, **19**, **24**, 26, **30**, 32, 33, 38, 39, **39**, **44**, **45**, **46**, 48, 54, **63**
aircraft 4, 6–7, 8, 11, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, **24**, 26, 31, 38, 45, 51, 59: An-2/-8 38; An-12 38, 39, 42–43, **45**, **47**; An-22 38, 45; An-24 42; F.62 8; Il-12/-14 32; Il-76 43, 45; Li-2 11, 21, **21**, 22, 26–27; PS-84 22; R-5 9, 10; TB-1 6, 8, 9; TB-3 8, 10, **11**, 12, 16, 20, 21, 22; Tu-4 32
air-defence coys/pltns 17, 51
anti-aircraft bns/btys/coys 17, 26, 36, 51
anti-aircraft guns 36, 43, 48, 51, **56**
anti-aircraft machine guns 17, 36
anti-aircraft missile/artillery btys 48
anti-tank bns/btys/coys 17, 26, 36, 38
anti-tank guided missiles 38, 46, 48
anti-tank guns/rifles 17, 26
artillery forces 10, 14, 17, 26, 32, 33, 36, 47, 48, 51, 54–55, 59
artillery pieces 4, 8, 11, 14, 17, 26, 33, 38, **39**, 43, 47, **47**, 51, 59
assault-gun bns 33, 47, 48, 51
assault rifles **4**, 34, **C1(35)**, 40, **D1–2(41)**, 43, **43**, 48, **E2(49)**, 52, **F2(53)**, **54**, 56, 60, **H1(61)**, **63**
aviation bdes/sqns 6, 7, 8, 10
aviation motorized landing dets 7, 8–10

Baltic states, forces in 16, 36
battledress/uniforms **1**, **4**, 5, **7**, 12, **12**, **A1–3(13)**, 14, **19**, **23**, **24**, 28, **B1–3(29)**, **30**, **31**, 33, 34, **C1–3(35)**, **39**, 40, **D1–3(41)**, **43**, **44**, **46**, **47**, **E1–3(49)**, 52, **F1–3(53)**, **54**, **55**, 56, **G1–3(57)**, **59**, 60, **H1–3(61)**, **63**
  badges/flashes/insignia/tabs 11, 12, **A3(13)**, 40, **D2(41)**, **42**, **43**, **44**, **46**, **47**, **E1–2(49)**, **55**, 56, **59**
  camouflage patterns 28, **B1(29)**, **B3(29)**, **30**, **C3(35)**, **D1(41)**, **55**, 56, **G2–3(57)**, **63**
  medals and awards **59**
  patches (sleeve) 34, **C1(35)**, 40, **D2(41)**, **E1(49)**, **55**
Bessarabia, operation in 16
bicycles 8, 11, 17, 38
Byelorussia, operations in 22, 33

carbines 10, 56, **G2(57)**, 60, **H3(61)**
Chmurov, Serzhant Igor B. **1**
communications coys/pltns 8, 48
Czechoslovakia, invasion of (1968) 4, 5, 40, **D1–3(41)**, 42–43, **42**, **43**, 50

'deep battle' (concept) 6, 8–9, 11–12, 14, 16, 43, 62
Dnepr River operation (1943) 4, 5, 11, 24–28, **27**, **B1–3(29)**
Dubček, First Secretary Alexander 40, 43

East Asia, operations in 14, 30
East Germany: forces in 48; uprising in 34
engineer forces 28, 30, 36, 48, 51, 56, **G3(57)**
equipment 8, **B1(29)**, **B3(29)**, **C1–3(35)**, 39, **39**, **D1–3(41)**, **43**, **47**, 48, **E1–3(49)**, 52, **F2–3(53)**, **54**, 56, **G2(57)**, 60, **H1(61)**, **H3(61)**, **63**

face wear 12, **A1(13)**, **B2(29)**, **31**, 34, **C3(35)**, **E3(49)**, 56, **G2(57)**
flamethrowers 17, 56, **G3(57)**, 60, **H3(61)**

Glagolev, Gen-polkovnik Vasily V. 31
Glazunov, Gen-leytenant Vasily A. 14, 18
glider clubs/grps/training 10, 16, 17, 18, 36
Great Patriotic War (1941–45) 17–30, 37, 44
grenade launchers 34, **C2(35)**, 36, 46, 51, 52, **F2(53)**, 54, **54**, 60, **H1(61)**, **63**
grenades 2, 10, 20, **30**, 48, 52, 60, **H1(61)**
Gromov, Gen-leytenant Boris V. 58, 59

headgear **1**, **4**, **7**, 12, **12**, **A1–3(13)**, **14**, **19**, **23**, **24**, 28, **B1–3(29)**, **30**, **31**, 34, **C1–3(35)**, **39**, 40, **D1–3(41)**, **43**, **44**, **46**, **47**, 48, **E1–3(49)**, 52, **F1–3(53)**, **54**, **55**, 56, **56**, **G1–3(57)**, **59**, 60, **H1–3(61)**, **63**
helicopters 5, 43–47, 48, 51, 52, **52**, **F(53)**, 55, 58: Mi-1/-4 44; Mi-6 46, 52; Mi-8 46, **52**, **F(53)**, **56**; Mi-24 **55**; Mi-26 52
Hungarian Uprising (1956) 5, 34, **C2(35)**, 36–37, 40, 43, 50

Irving Air Chute Company 7, 12

Khabarov, Leytenant Leonid **47**
knives 28, **B3(29)**, **C1(35)**, **D2–3(41)**, **E2(49)**, 60, **H1(61)**, **H3(61)**

machine-gun bns/coys/pltns 26
machine-gunners 28, **B2(29)**, 34, **C3(35)**, 40, **D3(41)**, 48, **E1(49)**, 56, **G1(57)**, 60, **H2(61)**
machine guns (general-purpose) 40, **D3(41)**, **46**, 47, 48, **58**, 60, **H2(61)**
machine guns (heavy) 9, 17, 26, 56, **G1(57)**, **58**
machine guns (light) 5, 9, **14**, 17, 28, **B2(29)**, 34, **C3(35)**, 38, **43**, 48, **E1(49)**, 52, **F3(53)**, **54**
MANPADS 48, **E3(49)**, 51, 55
Margelov, Gen-polkovnik Vasily F. 4, 5, 33, **33**, 38, 40, 42
medical bns/coys/squads 16, 26, 36, 51
Minov, Kombrig Leonid G. 5, 7–8
mortar bns/btys/coys/pltns 16, 17, 26, 36, 48, 50
mortars 16, 17, 26, 32, 36, 43, 48, 50, **50**
motorcycle-bicycle reconnaissance coys 16
motorcycles 8, 11, 38
motor-rifle forces 31, 36, 37, 50, 54, 58, 59
motorized and mechanized bdes 15
motorized bns/coys/dvns 10, 14, 37, 59, 62
multiple rocket launchers 38

Nagy, Prime Minister Imre 34, 36

OKSVA 50, 51–52, 54, 58
OSOAVIAKhIM 10

parachutes 7, **7**, 8, **9**, **11**, 12, **12**, **A2(13)**, 19, **19**, **24**, 28, 45, **45**
pistols/revolvers 10, 12, **A3(13)**, 40, **D1(41)**, 60, **H2(61)**

radios 11, 17, 28, 33, 56, **G2(57)**, 60, **H1(61)**
reconnaissance coys/dets/grps/pltns 16, 17, 26, 28, 30, 36, 40, 40, **D1(41)**, **47**, 48, 51, 56, 58, **58**
recoilless rifles 9, 14, 33, 36, **39**
rifle corps 10, 11, 20, 22, 30, 33
rifle coys/pltns 8, 26, 30
rifle dvns 5, 10, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 30, 31, 32, 33
rifle regts 12, 21, 22; rifles 10, **10**, 24, 28, 52
rocket forces/'rocketeers' 37, 51, 60, **H3(61)**

sapper coys/pltns 8, 16, 17, 26
'scopes/sights 28, **B1(29)**, 40, **D2(41)**, 52, **F1(53)**, 56, **G1(57)**, 60, **H1(61)**
scouting coys/patrols 26, 60, **H1–3(61)**
scouts (*razvedchiki*) 28, **B1(29)**, **30**, 56, **G2(57)**
Separate Guards intelligence coys 56, **G2(57)**
separate reconnaissance coys **47**
signals bns/coys/pltns 16, 17, 26, 36, 51
sniper rifles 28, **B1(29)**, 52, **F1(53)**
snipers/sharpshooters 28, 30, 52, **F1(53)**
special-purpose (Spetsnaz) forces 5, 6, 10, 14, 21, 40, 42, 43, 50, 51, 56, **58**, 60
Stavka 17, 18, 24–25, 26, 30
submachine guns 10, 12, **A1(13)**, **23**, 24, 26, 28, **B3(29)**, **30**
support coys/units 14, 16, 17, 47–48

tank/tankette forces 10, 16, 17, 18, 32, 37, 62
tankettes/tanks 8, 10, 11, 17, 25, 38, 42
TDA (Air-Landing Aviation Branch) 32
Timoshenko, Marshal Semyon K. 15
trucks/vehicles 8, 9, 18, 36, 38–39, 43, **46**, 47, 50, 51, 54, 55, 58, **58**
Tukhachevsky, Gen-mayor Mikhail N. 6, 7, 8, 10, 14

Ukraine, forces/operations in 19–20, 36

Vatutin, Gen armii Nikolai F. 25, 26, 27
Vyazma operation (1942) 4, 5, 21–24, 27

Zatevakhin, Gen-mayor Ivan I. 14, 15, 30
Zhukov, Komkor Georgy K. 15, 36, 37

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DEDICATION

In memory of Roy Greentree, a decent fellow.

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TITLE PAGE PHOTO: Hero of the Soviet Union Igor V. Chmurov among some of his men from the 345th Separate Guards Parachute Regiment, 1 November 1986. Chmurov joined the VDV in April 1984 and by the autumn he was serving in Afghanistan as a member of the 345th Separate Guards Parachute Regiment, operating in the environs of Kandahar and the Panjshir Valley. It was on 14 December 1985, during an operation to block a gorge in the Panjshir Valley, that Chmurov made his name. A sister company came under attack and Chmurov's *leytenant* drew two platoons away to assist, leaving a small covering force holding the heights, with Chmurov in a key position on the machine gun. Attacked repeatedly, Chmurov held on despite running out of ammunition and being badly wounded in the hip. He was reduced to throwing his last remaining hand grenade to beat back the final attack. His actions saw him promoted to *serzhant* (sergeant) and made a Hero of the Soviet Union the following May. (RIA Novosti archive, image #58466/Kharlampiev/Wikimedia/CC BY-SA 3.0)

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COMPARATIVE RANKS

US Army (NATO code)	Krasnaya Armiya, 1935–46	Sovetskaya Armiya, 1946–91
General of the Armies (OF-10)	*Marshal Sovetskogo Soyuza* (Marshal of the Soviet Union)	
General (OF-9)	*Komanduyushchiy armiyey 1-go ranga* (Komandarm 1-go ranga)[1]	*General Armii* (General of the Army)
–	*Komanduyushchiy armiyey 2-go ranga* (Komandarm 2-go ranga)[1]	–
Lieutenant General (OF-8)	*Komandir Korpusa* (Komkor)[1]	*General-polkovnik* (Colonel General)
Major General (OF-7)	*Komandir Divizii* (Komdiv)[1]	*General-leytenant*
Brigadier General (OF-6)	*Komandir Brigady* (Kombrig)[1]	*General-mayor*
Colonel (OF-5)	*Polkovnik*	
Lieutenant Colonel (OF-4)	*Podpolkovnik*	
Major (OF-3)	*Mayor*	
Captain (OF-2)	*Kapitan*	
First Lieutenant (OF-1)	*Starshiy Leytenant* (Senior Lieutenant)	
Second Lieutenant (OF-1)	*Leytenant* (Lieutenant)	
–	*Mladshiy Leytenant* (Junior Lieutenant)	
Command Sergeant Major (OR-9a)	–	*Starshiy Praporshchik* (Senior Warrant Officer)[2]
Sergeant Major (OR-9b)	–	*Praporshchik* (Warrant Officer)[3]
First Sergeant (OR-8)	*Starshina* (Sergeant Major)	
Sergeant First Class (OR-7)	*Starshiy Serzhant* (Senior Sergeant)	
Staff Sergeant (OR-6)	*Serzhant* (Sergeant)	
Sergeant (OR-5)	*Mladshiy Serzhant* (Junior Sergeant)[4]	
Corporal/Specialist (OR-4)	*Yefreytor* (Senior Private)[5]	
Private First Class (OR-3)	–	
Private E-2 (OR-2)	–	
Private E-1 (OR-1)	*Krasnoarmeyets* (Red Army Man)	*Ryadovoy* (Private)[6]

1. 22 September 1935–7 May 1940, after which the Army reverted to the more traditional ranks that continued into the post-war period.
2. From 12 January 1981.
3. From 1972.
4. From 1940.
5. Reintroduced in 1940.
6. From July 1946.